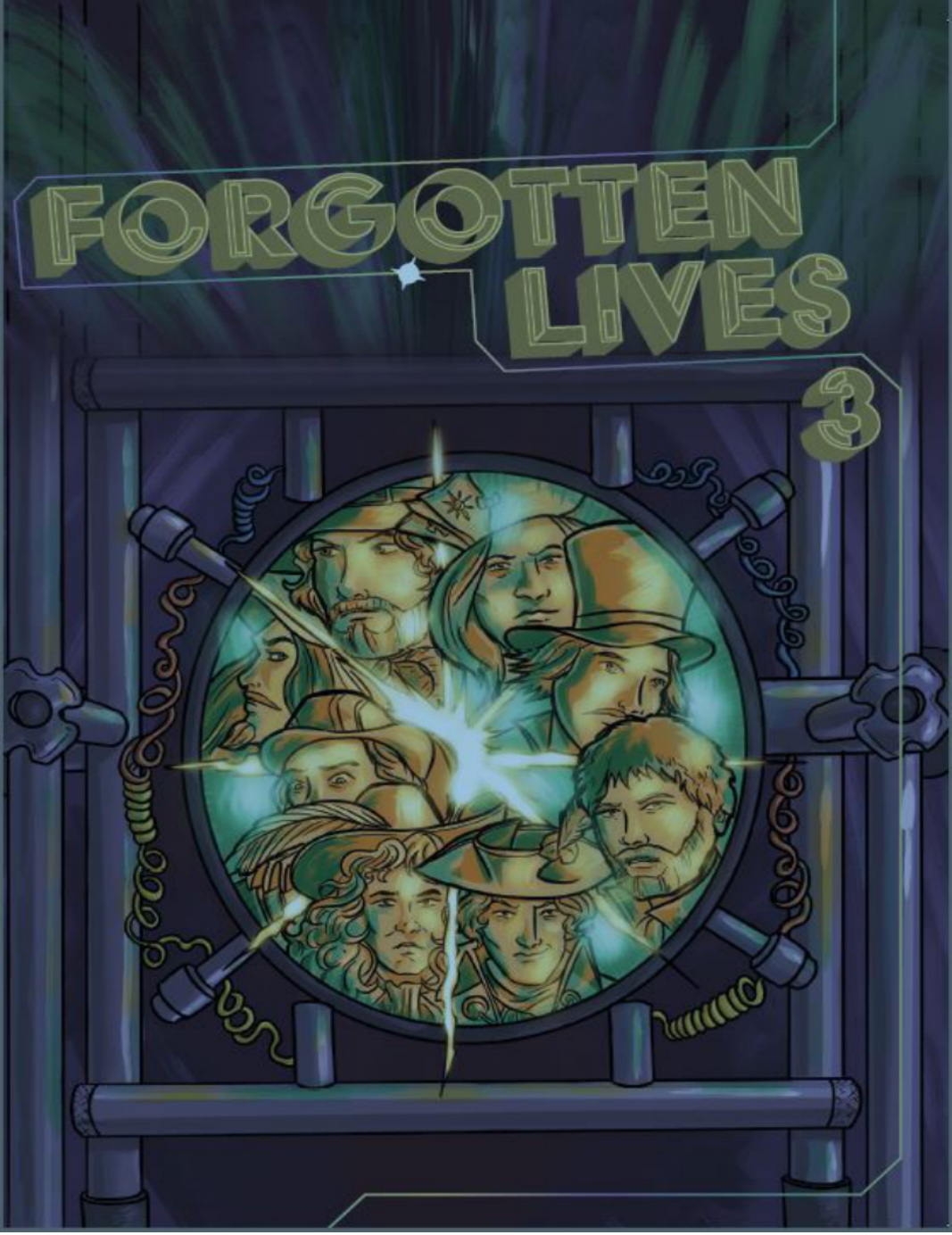
FORGOTTEN
LIVES
3

FORGOTTEN LIVES 3

AN ANTHOLOGY
IN AID OF ALZHEIMER'S CHARITIES

Edited by Philip Purser-Hallard

Stories by Simon Bucher-Jones, Kara Dennison, Paul Driscoll, Jay Eales, Ian McIntire, Philip Purser-Hallard, Daniel Tessier and Chris Wing

FORGOTTEN LIVES III

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‘En garde, Morbius.’

The Doctor’s voice was steely, but it was painfully clear to him that this was a contest he was going to lose.

He’d never been much of a hand at mind-bending, not even in the

friendly matches back at the Academy. Forcing one's opponent into a slow deconstruction of their personality took a certain ruthless mental focus. The Master had been a wizard at it. But the Doctor was not only too tender-hearted, he was all too easily distracted.

This time, though, in the depths of Solon's laboratory-mansion on Karn, a lot was riding on it. His own life, for a start, and doubtless Sarah Jane's as well.

This kind of contest hadn't been invented by the Time Lords, if memory served. Some species of intelligent social arthropod, wasn't it, whose lifecycle went through umpteen distinct instar stages? They'd invented it as a form of ritual combat, to select the best husbands for their queens. It had caught on, though, amongst various other cultures that metamorphosed, reincarnated, transmigrated or otherwise wore more than one body during the course of their lives.

And at some point, it had been adopted by the Time Lords. The Doctor wouldn't be surprised if that had happened during Morbius's own regime, actually. It seemed like the old tyrant's style.

In practice, it was rather like a two-way mind-probe, with all the mental agony that implied. Or like the telepathic contact between Time Lords that enabled memory sharing – but weaponised. As the stronger player penetrated further and further into the weaker's memories, those memories were stripped off like onionskins, and the loser's identity fell away with them.

At the Academy, where virtually no-one had any past incarnations to fall back on, the safety cutouts had been set well above the danger threshold. There was none of that mollycoddling with this apparatus – any regression would tip the balance in the dominant player's favour, leading to a feedback loop and potential deathlock for the loser. The Doctor had never seen it happen – the Gallifrey of his day was far too civilised – but from all he'd heard it wasn't pretty.

Morbius hailed from an earlier, less safety-conscious era, and the Doctor was pretty certain his ruthless focus could give the Master's a run for its money.

His only hope was that Morbius's brain, or the botched-together carcass supporting it, would collapse under the strain before the match properly ended. And even then, the Doctor wouldn't give much for his own

chances of survival.

Still, he thought cheerfully, needs must. He couldn't risk this patchwork despot escaping from Karn with the Sisterhood's elixir of life, announcing his return from the dead and inspiring his tedious followers to ravage the galaxy once again. The last time, according to the history books, it had taken a military campaign on the part of the Time Lords to stop them, and the Doctor couldn't see his contemporaries having the stomach for a fight like that.

For the moment, though, he had his own fight to worry about. As the technologically-boosted contact kicked in, the Doctor felt his mind pressed most unpleasantly up against Morbius's – which was already darting out tendrils like eels, probing for his weaknesses. The Doctor tried some probing of his own. He could sense Morbius's impatience, for instance, his inflexibility, the ready contempt that could so easily lead him to underestimate an opponent – though not, the Doctor, thought ruefully, in this case. He had no doubt that Morbius in turn had identified the Doctor's own self-doubt, his dark moods, and the lack of discipline of which his tutors had so often complained. So much for the preliminaries.

He saw the psychic readout that was the apparatus's scoreboard coalesce into an image of Morbius as he was now – his face a fishbowl, his eyes sensor-stalks, his naked brain displayed to the world. The Doctor supposed that Sarah was watching the display too. He knew he should give her a reassuring grin, but at the moment he couldn't even spare the concentration to glance at her.

He made an experimental psychic thrust at his opponent, and as he watched the globular head dissolved, replaced on the display by the cruel aristocratic face – his wrinkled lip, his sneer of cold command – that had been Morbius's before his botched execution.

In theory, this return to a past form meant that the Doctor was gaining the upper hand. In reality, he had no such hopes. Supremely confident in his own abilities, his rival was allowing him to demonstrate the limits of his strength before he even began his assault.

And then it came. The Doctor struggled to keep his foothold as the pressure of the dictator's will pushed him back along his timeline, and the Caesar-like visage before him shimmered and became his own. Androids, mummies and unlikely antimatter werewolves all flashed through his

psychic vision, accompanied by the worried face of Sarah Jane Smith. Was that a memory, or what his eyes were seeing? It was difficult to keep the difference clear in his mind.

Daleks raced by, scolding him, followed by the heavy tread of Cybermen. A whicker of Wirrn, a gruff word from the dear old Brigadier, and then his current life was stripped away from him.

The Doctor was better with other people's faces than his own, but he recognised the one that the display was showing now. He used to see it in the mirror. The white-haired chap, rueful and avuncular and infinitely condescending, with the lined face and the dress sense borrowed from Liberace.

'Feel your mind, Doctor, going?' he half-heard Morbius bellow. Was his opponent really sparing the energy to gloat at a time like this? That was just showing off. Experimentally, the Doctor pushed back against the other player with all his strength, and for an instant felt the memory of his most recent regeneration return.

For a moment, the screen reasserted what to the best of his recollection was his current face, but Morbius's assault redoubled at once and the white-haired dandy was back. Had he once been able to carry off a velvet cape like that? He supposed he must have been. He couldn't remember anyone ever criticising it. But then, whatever he remembered of that incarnation was diminishing rapidly already.

'How far, Doctor? How long have you lived?'

Well yes, that was the question, wasn't it? The Doctor had never been much of a one for self-reflection. He'd never seen the point of dwelling on the past, or for that matter the future – not his own past or future, anyway. He tended to deflect questions about his age with glib, suspiciously rounded numbers. Nor did he have much of a memory for faces – not his own faces, at least.

So never mind his age – how many lives *had he lived? The question was becoming increasingly pressing.*

Who was on the screen now? Oh yes, that little fellow. Dishevelled, rumpled, easily alarmed, like a strangely sanitary tramp in some silent film. He recalled he'd been disappointed by his diminutive size at first, but then decided to make the best use of it, becoming unassuming to get under his enemies' guard.

Oh – that *had been a mistake. In thinking back to his earliest memories of that body, he'd allowed Morbius to strip the rest of them away in one go, like a satisfyingly cooperative strip of wallpaper. An entire incarnation, swallowed in one mouthful.*

The face before him now was an old curmudgeon with shrewd eyes. In his mind's ear he heard a lecturing tone, leavened by a disconcertingly boyish giggle. Oh yes, the Doctor remembered that one all right. Cybermen stomped past again, and Daleks of course, and his granddaughter Susan. He supposed it must be a long time since he'd seen her, but he remembered none of that now. His early life rushed past him at alarming speed.

Unless Morbius's mechanical support systems broke soon, the deathlock would become irreversible. The Doctor would be trapped, unthinking, inside the shell of his current body – whatever that looked like – while Morbius renewed his murderous rampage, starting with… what was the name? Someone important to him, he imagined.

Well, he'd done what he could.

Then, to his relief and mild surprise, a further face appeared on the screen.

If you'd asked the Doctor this morning, he would have sworn he'd never worn a moustache, except perhaps as a disguise. But this fellow had one, and it suited him. A top hat, too, and a showman's bow tie, and a cane that doubled as a magic wand. An elegant conjurer with a twinkling smile, a practiced patter and a flair for melodrama. Yes, the Doctor recognised himself now.

And he remembered something else, something connected with Morbius. Again, he would have said a few minutes ago that all his knowledge of that old oppressor came from history books, but now he felt that he'd… not met him, no, not formally at least, but… well, that there was something. Some connection.

As memories flared and flashed into smoke, he seized a passing incident and looked at it more closely. Yes, there it was. That time that Varne had taken him back to Goose Common, the place where that most recent life of his had begun. There had been fireworks, and not just the metaphorical kind.

THE LUNGS OF THE BIRASTROP
by Paul Driscoll

It was Jack Forrester's favourite time of the year. Bonfire night was three days away, and the increasingly elaborate celebrations in Goose Common had become legendary. The centrepiece, the huge fire on the 'village' green, was going to be bigger than ever, judging by the amount of waste the locals had been dumping there. Broken chair legs, old fences and, most pleasingly of all, piles of used school exercise books – with not a comic in sight – all carefully positioned to create the brightest and tallest of flames. But what excited Jack the most, as he headed across the green towards Ted Fowler's convenience store, was the thrill of trying out the latest firecrackers on the market.

He stopped for a moment on the corner of the green and smiled at the police box. 'Hello, my old friend,' he muttered. The box stood proudly, its frosted windows glistening in the sunlight as if it were a beacon of hope. His father's pride and joy, the emergency telephone had only been installed a few weeks ago. It had been 'opened' with aplomb by the borough's mayor, in due recognition for the long and drawn-out public safety campaign his Dad had been coordinating. Jack had enjoyed the ceremony until his Dad was asked to make a speech on behalf of the Met. It was a cringeworthy, emotional affair about his fear of losing 'Jacky boy' again. But Jack's thoughts inevitably turned to his old friend Varne. It had been two years since his alien comic book buddy had been whisked away by the mysterious Doctor Crocus inside that noisy and impossible time machine of his.

* * *

The Doctor was sulking in the TARDIS. He always hated goodbyes, but this one particularly hurt. He'd had plenty of companions before, but Varne was the first one he could truly call his apprentice.

'It's time to let me go, Doctor. You've showed me so many wonderful things, but I can't keep running away for ever. I miss my home.'

‘But Varne, you hated your Vardian existence. You even tried to rewrite it by travelling back in time.’

‘Yes, but I know better now – thanks to you. The only way things will change is by fighting back.’

The Doctor angrily whacked Chuckaboo against the TARDIS floor. The wooden cane immediately signalled its displeasure with a furious display of red sparks.

‘Sorry, Chuckaboo, but if there’s one thing that being with me should have taught our friend Varne here, it’s that fisticuffs are never the answer.’

‘That’s not what I mean,’ sighed Varne. ‘I have to stand up for the truth. Rally my people to say no to our human oppressors. You’ve put a fire in me, a fire that won’t go out until the Vardians have been set free.’

The Doctor looked embarrassed by Varne’s idealism.

‘Oh my, you’re beginning to sound like me. And not in a good way. Just ask yourself this – can you guarantee your revolution will be without violence and bloodshed?’

‘Any deaths will be down to the humans, not me… Oh don’t give me that look, Doctor. How many unnecessary killings have we witnessed together?’

The Doctor bowed his head. As adept as he was at winning an argument even when he knew he was in the wrong, he had no counter for this.

‘The plains of Avetanor? The devastation of Delta-10? The Great Fire of London? The Peruvian Death Eaters?’ continued Varne. The Doctor flinched after every example. It was as if Varne was firing bullets at him. Enough was enough.

‘Your ship is in the TARDIS dock,’ he snapped. ‘It’s not like I’ve been keeping you here as prisoner, if you want to go, what’s stopping you?’

Varne placed a pile of penny dreadfuls on the TARDIS console.

‘What’s this, a parting gift?’

‘I don’t want it to end like this, Doctor. One last trip. You and

me. What do you say?'

The Doctor's eyes lit up. There were all kinds of adventures he could drop them into, each one offering plenty of ways to tempt Varne out of leaving.

Varne knew exactly what he was thinking. It was the reaction he'd hoped he'd get, confirmation that the Doctor's friendship was genuine. That he would be missed.

'I don't want another adventure, Doctor,' he said gently. 'I picked these up the night we smuggled onto the Shah's boat to catch the Terror of the Thames. For once, let's relax together.'

'A holiday?' said the Doctor, as if the word was an allergy.

'I'd like to visit Jack before I go home, he'd love these. Sure, I could find my own way there, but I thought it would be nice if we both went. Back to where it all started. What do you say?'

The Doctor stroked his moustache as a fake look of disappointment was replaced by a forced grimace. He closed his eyes and, ever so slowly, his expression turned into a broad grin.

* * *

Barney Forrester wasn't quite sure how to react when the Doctor called round with Varne. Here they were, in his house, doing the most ordinary of things by having a cup of tea, but Barney knew their return would almost certainly set into motion another chain of extraordinary events. He still hadn't fully recovered from the drama of two years ago. He looked at the empty rocking chair and the half-finished knitting on the side table. This time there was no Mabel to settle his nerves.

'I am so sorry for your loss,' said the Doctor as he faced the wall and gestured in a way Barney found impossible to interpret. He presumed it was a mark of respect, or an act of kindness from the Doctor's alien culture. Death must mean the same, wherever you come from.

'It was mercifully quick,' replied Barney. The Doctor blew away some dust from a framed tapestry above the fireplace. 'Do you like it?'

Barney asked.

'It's missing a button'.

Barney smiled. The artwork depicted the Doctor stood next to a police box in his Victorian garb. It had been made up almost entirely of blue buttons on a beige cloth. There was a piece missing from the Doctor's chest. He took a red button from his pocket and wedged it into the gap.

'It's the last thing she did in that chair,' said Barney. 'She'd run out of buttons. I kind of left it like that on purpose.'

'In the vain hope she might one day come back from the dead to complete it?' said the Doctor.

'Not exactly,' sighed Barney, pleased to see that young Varne, at least, was horrified by the Doctor's insensitivity.

'How's Jack?' Varne asked awkwardly.

'Why don't you ask him yourself?' Barney smiled as the door opened.

Jack triumphantly held up his latest stash of firecrackers. 'Dad, you won't believe what these ones are called... Doctor! Varne! What are you doing here?'

Varne looked like any normal teenage boy, thought Barney, trying his best to hide the joy of seeing an old friend. 'How you been, Jack? Moved on from the comics, I see?'

'Fat chance,' said Barney. 'His room's been overrun with them. We learnt our lesson two years ago, made allowances for Jack's age.'

'Glad to hear it!' said the Doctor. 'But age has nothing to do with it.'

'I didn't think I'd ever see you again,' said Jack.

'Here,' replied Varne. 'You can add these to your collection.'

'Are these genuine originals? From 1878?' Jack knew he hadn't really needed to ask. 'These can wait,' he added, throwing the firecrackers onto the sofa. 'Come on! I want to know everything, Varne. Where you've been. The adventures you've had... did you see monsters...'

As the boys ran upstairs, the Doctor picked up one of the deep blue firecrackers and laughed. ‘The Sizzling Sausage. I forget just how poor the human imagination can be.’ He sniffed it and gave a quizzical look.

‘You don’t have gunpowder where you’re from?’ asked Barney.

The Doctor took the round blue cardboard base off the firecracker and swapped the red button on the tapestry for it. He dipped a finger in the cracker and licked it. ‘Most odd...’ he mused. ‘Most odd indeed’.

* * *

Later that evening, Jack took Varne to the village green and filled him in on the bonfire night tradition.

‘What is it with humans and starting fires?’ said Varne, remembering the ceremonial burnings of the penny dreadfuls in the church garden.

‘Not a single comic on this beast, trust me – I’ve checked. Come on, let’s see what these babies can do...’

As the sparks started to pop out of the firecracker, Varne looked bemused. ‘Aren’t you supposed to throw it, or let go at least?’

‘Well yes, we’re not that dumb. But it’s stuck.’ Jack started to sweat as he tried to use his other hand to wrench off the firecracker.

‘Here, let me.’ Varne tried to pull it off, but it was stuck like glue. He took a knife from his pocket and tried to cut it off. ‘I thought it was cardboard. Over there, the water fountain.’

Sweating now, Jack held his arm out as far as possible as they ran for the fountain.

But before they could reach it, the cracker let out the most pathetic bang accompanied by an almost imperceptible blue spark.

The boys laughed with relief.

‘Is this really what passes for fun on your planet? And to think I seriously considered staying,’ said Varne.

‘Must have been a dud one,’ said Jack. ‘Let’s try another, I think it’s starting to peel off.’

The cardboard dissolved away before their very eyes but the ashes inside didn’t fall. The dust-like particles danced around Jack and merged to form the shape of a blue snake. It grew larger and began to coil itself around Jack’s body.

‘Varne, what’s it doing?’

Varne slashed at the creature with his knife, but as soon as it had pierced the skin another snake emerged from the wound, wrapping itself loosely around Varne.

‘We need to get the Doctor,’ spluttered Varne, but the two boys were beginning to lose consciousness. The odd thing was the snakes were hardly squeezing the life out of them. It looked more like the creatures were performing some kind of ceremonial dance around the boys, yet it still felt like they were suffocating. The moment they both passed out, the snakes turned back into millions of dust particles before completely disappearing into the ether.

* * *

Ted Fowler, having just finished restocking the shop, was the first person to see the boys. He checked their pulses then used the police box to call for help. Within five minutes an ambulance had arrived and taken Jack and Varne away. Ted was left to contact the next of kin, something he was dreading, but even before he had arrived at the Forresters’, Barney and the Doctor were already out looking for the boys, as if they already knew they were in danger.

‘Found ’em out cold on the green,’ said Ted. ‘So I called for an ambulance. Probably the first time that box of yours has been used for a genuine emergency. Ironic, really, that it should be about your Jack. You’ll need to get to the general. They’ll be in safe hands.’

‘What were the paramedics like?’ asked the Doctor, a question that irritated Barney.

‘Didn’t think we’d ever see you back round these parts...’ replied Ted, wary of the Doctor.

‘Forget all that, you’re both wasting time,’ shouted Barney. ‘What happened? Are they going to be OK?’

‘It was odd,’ admitted Jack. ‘The paramedics were dressed up to the nines like they were entering a nuclear plant. Face masks and all. They pushed me away and wouldn’t talk.’

Barney looked at the Doctor, hoping he’d know what this meant, but the Doctor was distracted and holding Chuckaboo up to his ear.

‘It’s happening all over the country, just like it said on the news broadcast we watched at your place,’ the Doctor noted, apparently using his cane as some kind of radio device. ‘People collapsing on contact with this new firecracker. I imagine the hazmat suits will be a precaution – in case it’s some kind of terrorist attack. But if this is chemical warfare, it’s way ahead of its time.’

‘Chemical?’ said Barney, aghast. ‘The Russians?’

The Doctor was blushing with guilt – clearly hiding something, thought Barney.

‘I wish it were that simple, I really do,’ said the Doctor, sounding far more serious than he did when Jack disappeared two years ago. ‘We need to get to the hospital, now.’

* * *

Varne shivered when he came round. His eyes struggled to adjust to the brightness of the white, clinical environment he now found himself in. As his sight began to normalise he could see he was in a huge ward filled with row upon row of metal beds. Jack was still unconscious in the bed next to his, as were the dozens of other patients who looked to be around the same age.

None of them were wired up to any instruments and the overall atmosphere was disturbingly tranquil. It was almost silent, save from a low-pitched hum. Varne could feel a steady vibration as if the room was moving, but he decided it probably came from the strange lighting rigs hanging from the canvas ceiling. They provided welcome warmth to the icy cold setting. This was a tent, he realised, some kind of makeshift hospital. He tried to wake Jack, but approaching

footsteps sent him scurrying back to his bed, where he pretended to be asleep like the rest of them. What he next heard shook him to the core.

'447 implants needed in total at the London facility.'

'And country-wide?' This second voice was a feminine, one in contrast to the deep tone of the first, yet both were accompanied by a serious of clicks and gargles that made Varne convinced they were not human. He wanted to take a peek, but thought better of it.

'The emergency has affected 1,590 so far, with 932 of them meeting the required demographic.'

'A minor incident compared to most,' huffed the female. 'I much prefer the world war and plague extractions. Still, it will have to do. But what of the contamination? Are we sure the lungs are not irreparably damaged?'

'It's a mystery. Our scientists can see no physical reason why the firecracker is causing the comas. Nonetheless, these humans have been deemed expendable. Fear of the unknown demands that they never be allowed to return to society. The implants should be fine. They will save their lives, for now at least.'

The female made the most extraordinary noise before the two left the room. Varne had a hunch it was probably a laugh. He cursed the Doctor – he was obviously in the middle of some kind of alien invasion. Again. The Doctor had no doubt timed their arrival so that he could tempt him to stay with one more adventure. He shook his head. 'It's not going to work, Doctor. As soon as we're done here, I'm off.' He tried to wake Jack again, but his open eyes didn't flinch. Remembering what happened with the firecracker, Varne checked his hand. All that was left was a slight stick-shaped blue tinge. Varne checked a few of the other patients. All of them had similar markings. 'I'll come back for you, Jack, I promise.' He didn't bother arranging his own bed to make it look like he was still there. The Doctor's occasional over-cautiousness was one thing that hadn't rubbed off on him. With his pocket knife still to hand, Varne tentatively made his way to the exit.

* * *

A huge queue of concerned relatives were trying to bustle their way into North Middlesex Hospital's accident and emergency department. Tutting at the back, the Doctor raised Chuckaboo and sent a shower of confetti over the impatient crowd, accompanied by a squeal that sounded like a Catherine Wheel.

'Nice touch, Doctor... so appropriate in the circumstances,' said Barney sarcastically.

'At least it's not sausages,' said the Doctor, who just didn't get the point.

'Who the hell are you?' said one of the parents.

'I'm the Doctor. Step aside.'

Within seconds, much to Barney's amazement, the crowd had arranged itself to give them clear passage through to the front. Before entering the building, the Doctor turned to them and said, 'I'll get the answers. Promise.' As the questions came firing back at them, he waved nonchalantly as if he was royalty. 'Each and every one of your children will be OK, I will make sure of that.'

The young assistant at the booking-in desk got straight to the point. 'If you're here about the major incident, I can't help you. They've all been taken to a specialist unit out of town. That's all I know. We're having a sign put up outside because our priority is to treat other patients, and that crowd is really getting in the way.'

'How very mysterious!' said the Doctor, unexpectedly jovial. Everyone else had got angry with the lack of detail and her casual gum-chewing.

'I just want to know where my son is,' said Barney. He produced his police badge, which didn't seem to impress the girl in the slightest. 'I demand to know where they've been taken. Do you have a phone number, anything?'

'Come on, Barney,' said the Doctor. 'We need to go to the top. Someone clearly saw this day coming. I'll call the health minister, he owes me a favour.'

Outside, things had taken a turn for the worse. Security had

been called when a member of the crowd threatened to set off another Sizzling Sausage. ‘If you won’t take me to my son, then I’ll find another way to join him.’

The crowd were egging him on at first, until the security guard pulled out a gun and fired a warning shot. To everyone’s horror, as the concerned father opened a box of matches, the guard shot him in the leg. Within seconds a van pulled up beside the crowd and two men in hazmat suits bustled their way through the crowd to collect the discarded firecracker. ‘Anybody else have one?’ one of them said. ‘For your own safety we need to confiscate them. He could have killed you all.’

The Doctor ushered Barney away from the angry crowd and used Chuckaboo to wedge open the back door of the van. ‘Inside,’ he whispered.

* * *

Varne had made it outside the tent. A series of military trucks were parked outside, alongside several ambulances and a large caravan. Fortunately, the tent appeared to have been erected in some kind of clearing in a wooded area, so Varne quickly found a tree to hide behind. He watched as equipment was wheeled into the tent. The aliens running the operation were reptile-like. Most of them were naked, while a few were wearing cloaks of different colours and crowns that looked like they were made of thorns. Their limbs were huge and their muscles bulged as they worked. Given that they were apparently going to be operating on the human patients, their two-fingered clawed hands looked far from practical.

‘What are you?’ Varne whispered to himself. If they’d been human he would have reverted to his natural state to scare them off, but compared to these beasts his Vardian form was pathetic. He needed to find the Doctor, but he had no idea where this was. He cursed as his hand started to itch. Whatever that snake thing was, it was affecting him differently from Jack. A new van arrived, sending a shower of mud his way. Out stepped two people fully suited up. The first took his mask off, leant against the van and lit a cigarette. To Varne’s surprise, he was human. The driver soon joined him and

followed suit. One of the advantages of being a Vardian was having exceptional hearing, but that particular gift was working better than ever.

* * *

‘That’s the lot hopefully. I’m beat.’

‘Yeah, I mean the pay’s good and all, but this is weird as hell,’ agreed the driver.

One of the cloak-bearing aliens approached them.

‘Your service for the protection of your world has been noted,’ he said.

‘We’re free to go?’

‘Of course. Leave the van here.’

‘We’re not walking back,’ said the driver.

‘Then I suggest you start running now,’ replied the alien.

‘Hey, wait a minute. Are you selling us out? Where’s the pay?’

A human female ran across to them from one of the military vehicles.

‘Ignore Doctor Bartek,’ she said. ‘He’s just joking with you. But this operation is highly sensitive. We don’t want to cause unnecessary panic. You’ll need to be debriefed before we can send you on your way. Come on, I’ve made some tea.’

The alien growled, in what Varne interpreted as a note of disappointment, as the woman took the men into one of the trucks. He sniffed the air and turned around, looking straight at the tree Varne was hiding behind. Another grunt and then he entered the white van and drove it slowly down a muddy makeshift path. The back doors of the van opened, and Varne clenched his fist when he saw the Doctor and Barney hanging on to the doors as the van sped up.

* * *

The Doctor and Barney were about to jump out of the van, when it suddenly swivelled round. They were now hanging over a deep hole in the ground, desperately clinging onto the swinging doors. The creature put on the brakes, got out of the van and with little effort pushed it into the hole, sending the pair of them tumbling down along with the vehicle and hundreds of unused firecrackers.

Fortunately, a ton of firecrackers were already in the pit to soften the blow as they landed safely clear of the van.

'Well that's just careless,' said the Doctor, dusting himself down. A spark from the van had lit one of the firecrackers; within seconds the rest of them would be up in flames.

'Hold on for your life,' said the Doctor, positioning Chuckaboo between the two of them.

'If this thing can fly, I've seen it all,' said Barney.

'Not flying exactly, just a bit of old fashioned gravity manipulation. Make it quick, Chuckaboo.'

As the crackers fizzed and sizzled, the Doctor and Barney were ever-so-slowly levitating as they held on to the cane. They'd only just made it out when the fireworks exploded, sending plumes of blue smoke and strange specks of screaming dust into the woods around them. At first they could hardly see through the smoke but, quite unnaturally, it rapidly dissipated, leaving no apparent ill effects save from the most curious of smells.

'It smells like Cassandra's cafe before the early shift. Her builders' breakfast special,' said Barney.

The Doctor picked up the remains of another firecracker. Just like he had done back in Goose Common, he licked a finger, dipped it inside the shell of the cracker and tasted it. 'Curiouser and curiouser,' he mumbled.

'I haven't got a clue where we are, but two hours in that van and travelling south I'm guessing somewhere in Surrey. Could be Box Hill. Come on, we have to find that creature. It has to lead us to the boys, right?' said Barney.

'No need,' smiled the Doctor spotting Varne running towards them.

* * *

After a breathless Varne had filled them in on everything he'd witnessed, the trio considered their next move.

'Someone is interfering with human history,' said the Doctor. 'I thought the TARDIS was sounding a bit off when we landed. That explains why.'

Varne wasn't buying it at first. 'You're telling me you didn't know this was going to happen?'

'How could I? There's no mention of this in volume 62 of Shanks' *The Secret History of Earth: From the Big Bang to the Third Interstellar War*.'

'Whatever. Those great big reptile-like creatures,' said Varne. 'It's got to be another invasion of Earth. What is it with this planet?'

'Not necessarily. Remember what I've taught you, Varne. Never judge an alien by the colour of his skin. It's just as likely they are here to help. I mean, why else would they be so keen to destroy the firecrackers? No... whoever produced these fireworks, they are the real enemy here.'

'Friendly aliens?' mocked Barney. 'Whoever heard of such a thing?'

The Doctor and Varne looked at each other as if to say, *What about us?*, but their expressions went completely over Barney's head.

'There are countless races of aliens who serve to maintain the order of the universe,' explained the Doctor. 'This planet has plenty of friends.'

'So what are you saying, we just go and introduce ourselves to them? If Varne's right, they're about to operate on my son.'

'Life-saving treatment, maybe...' replied the Doctor.

'Whatever it is, we are wasting time. We have to get him out of there now,' said Barney. 'We can go and scare them off with that magical cane of yours. There must be a laser bolt setting, or something like that.'

‘Chuckaboo here is more harmless than one of your police truncheons, I’d have you know,’ the Doctor snapped. ‘We come in peace. Always in peace. And we take it from there.’

‘And there was I thinking I was being the reckless one,’ sighed Varne. The Doctor’s unpredictability could be so infuriating at times. It was almost as if the more dangerous a situation, the less worried the Doctor seemed. One day he would caution Varne about stroking a harmless-looking alien pet, yet the next throw caution to the wind and walk brazenly straight into a warzone.

* * *

A warzone was perhaps the best description of the sight that Jack woke up to. The last time the Doctor showed up in Goose Common he’d been transported back to Victorian England and once again, just hours after the Doctor had unexpectedly returned, he’d suddenly found himself far from home. But unlike before, when the landmark of the church had brought a small degree of comfort, there was nothing even remotely familiar about his present surroundings.

The alien horizon stretched for miles and in the far distance, quite remarkably given the usual limits of human vision, he could see an intense battle taking place the other side of a red, tumultuous sea. Even beyond that, floating in the sky, below the three suns, was a metallic-looking structure – a circular-shaped fortress of some kind with various coloured dragons flying around it. The battle was being fought on land, sea and sky. But this side of the alien sea, he was sat with hundreds of others, all around a similar age to him but wearing a mixture of clothes, some contemporary and some completely out of place, near the top of the downslope of a hill overlooking the war.

At the bottom of the hill, a hideous creature was addressing them, his voice somehow sounding like he was stood right next to him. Many of those around him were in shock, unable to process the madness of their situation; others were not so passive. Those who tried to run away were immediately pulled back to their spot by one of the machines that was patrolling in the sky above them. Beams of light from the base of the flying objects froze them and they were levitated back to their allocated position in the crowd.

White chalk circles marking each individual spot had been drawn in the purple grass. In front of Jack were a rucksack, a metal flask, a box containing what looked like several dry biscuits, a handgun of some kind, a walkie-talkie, a pair of studded oversized shoes and a map. Everyone near him had the exact same setup.

'Welcome to the tri-solar galaxy, soon to be named Oberon. Specifically, the once bountiful planet Manduka IV. The good news is you are not dead,' said the lizard thing at the bottom of the hill. Jack looked to see if the voice was being transmitted through the radio device, but no, somehow the creature who was stood at least a mile away didn't need to shout to be heard. 'The bad news is that death is on the horizon. Literally so. My task is to give you the best instructions on how you can stay alive. It is vital you follow them. You have all the supplies you need to make this mission a success.'

What mission? thought Jack. *I didn't sign up to any of this.* The last thing he could remember was lighting a match to set off the Sizzling Sausage. He told himself it must be a dream, but immediately panicked because he'd been brought up on the superstition that as soon as you realised you were dreaming you would wake up.

'It matters not if you consider this an illusion, a computer simulation, the world of the spirits from whatever religion you follow, or a real alien vista,' said the alien instructor. 'Victory here will bring about your full healing and a return to your world. For some of you, it will be like waking up after an operation, for others your recovery will feel like the completion of a natural process. But all of you will be able to say you came back from the jaws of death. Think of it like this... your continued miserable existence is your reward. This fight is for you, not me. For your kind, not mine. Inside that fortress is the elixir that will bring about your healing. Your task is to break through the defences, to evade the traps set before you, and drink from the Fountain of Life in the sacred inner sanctum.'

Jack looked around. Some were still wanting to run in the opposite direction, but others looked determined, up for the challenge. One or two even started running down the hill. They were mostly the ones wearing clothes Jack couldn't place – tee-shirts with printed images he didn't recognise of rock bands, cartoon characters and what he guessed were movie posters. They were in marked contrast to the

kids that looked like they'd stepped out of various pages of a history book. Less fazed by the situation than the others, and treating the whole thing like it was some kind of game, they were quickly put back in their place by the machines.

'It is not a race, you will do well to remember that,' said the creature. 'The elixir flows eternally from the great well that sustains all life in the universe, and is sanctified by a flame that can never be extinguished. There is enough for everyone.'

Next to Jack was a pretty-faced but fierce-looking girl with curly ginger hair, wearing what Jack could only describe as rags. She was just as keen as the strangely-dressed ones to get on with it; indeed, she'd already filled the rucksack with all the other items that had been laid out and was about to walk down.

'It's not worth it,' Jack said. 'I think we better wait until that thing says we can go.'

'Boy, you have too much black bile in you,' she snarled.

'What?' said Jack. 'This just gets weirder and weirder.'

'Positively imbalanced,' she added. 'I can help you with that if you like.'

To Jack's surprise she pulled out a little knife, a small stone bowl and a towel from a waist band hidden inside her dress. 'I have to hide them, I'm not allowed to practice in the nunnery, but don't worry, I know what I'm doing.'

'And what exactly is that?'

'You don't know? It might hurt a bit, but it's safe and harmless. Look, I've done it to myself loads of times.'

Jack was horrified when she showed him the deep scars in her arms.

The girl softened when she realised just how scared Jack was. 'My name is Agnes. Agnes Culpepper. I'm training to be a nun at the priory in Neasham.'

'Name's Jack, but sorry, I'm not the religious type. Never gone in for all that praying and singing. Mind you, I think I might start now. Did you get here after setting off a firecracker too?'

‘Firecracker?’ She squeezed a fresh wound on the inside of her left elbow. ‘I know not of what you speak. I think I became enfeebled when I was bloodletting. I’d just had a row with Sister Anne and needed to test my yellow bile level. It’s strange that it’s dried so quickly and there’s no blood in the bowl.’

‘Are you sure they didn’t drown you for being a witch?’ said Jack, with a typically tactless joke.

To his surprise, she laughed. ‘They would if they could. I’m not exactly following the rules. See…,’ Agnes pulled up some of the purple grass, sniffed it and, removing the map, stuffed it inside her rucksack. ‘I believe in healing remedies banned by the church. The bloods are just the start.’

‘What on earth are you planning to do with it, smoke it?’

This particular joke was lost on Agnes, but she became very animated as she enthused about her strange ways. Jack found the innocence of it all rather charming.

‘I’ve never seen anything like it before, so I need to test it for healing properties. I come from a family of herbalists, you see. Even the nuns would punish me for that, so you must not tell anyone.’

‘I don’t think you need to worry on that front,’ said Jack. ‘I think we are very far from Neasham.’

‘They ought to know better, given how much the church hates us,’ Agnes continued. ‘The bishop wants to shut us down but he is scared of Sister Margaret. He won’t admit it, but he can’t deny she is called by God. Menfolk might not respect us, but they need us. People prefer to come to the priory for healing because our methods work. We can stay together if you like. I do have the Lord on my side.’

‘How can you be so calm about this?’ Jack was fully expecting her to reply with *God works in mysterious ways*, words that had so offended him at his mother’s funeral.

‘Through trials and tribulations we grow stronger. I’ve always wanted to travel the world. This is indeed a gift from God.’ She unrolled her map and looked genuinely excited. ‘My favourite kind of book. Ever since I saw a copy of the *Universalis Cosmographia* at the abbey.’

‘It’s a map, not a book.’

‘A map can tell a thousand stories,’ Agnes replied. ‘And this one is ours.’

* * *

The Doctor knocked on the door of the caravan where Varne had seen the women take the two men from the van.

‘My Jack’s in that tent over there, right?’ said Barney preparing to march straight for it as they waited for an answer.

‘Yea, but let’s do things the Doctor’s way,’ Varne replied. ‘We don’t know if those lizard creatures are dange…’ It was too late. Barney was in no mood to wait. He wrenched Chuckaboo out of the Doctor’s hand and headed straight for the tent.

Before the Doctor could stop him, the caravan door opened and the woman Varne had seen earlier greeted them.

‘How did you find us?’ she said, sounding like a stern schoolteacher.

The Doctor doffed his hat. ‘A curious opening line. Don’t you want to know who we are first? That’s usually how the interrogation starts.’

‘You’re not the first parent to sniff us out,’ she sighed, in a clear attempt to undermine their achievement. ‘I do understand your concern, of course I do. But it is paramount that this facility remains off the radar. Come inside, you’ll need to sign the official secrets act before I can tell you anything.’

The caravan was filled with rows of computer equipment. Varne instantly knew it was all way ahead of its time. ‘Where are the guys from the van?’ he said.

‘Guys from the van?’

‘I saw everything, so don’t bother lying,’ Varne replied.

The Doctor intervened. ‘Excuse my assistant’s impatience. He’s just worried about his friend. He’s a patient here.’ Varne clenched his teeth – he hated it when the Doctor called him the ‘A’ word. It was

one of the many reasons why he was now so eager to part company. ‘I think he means the van that’s just exploded in that pit of fireworks your lot made earlier,’ the Doctor continued. ‘Not the smoothest of rides, I grant you, but nice of your men to give us a lift. Poor van though, it didn’t deserve that.’

‘Sit,’ ordered the woman, clearly angered by the failings of her men. She gestured towards two empty swivel chairs. Varne obliged, but the Doctor instead pushed some papers aside and sat on her desk, waving his legs about like some unruly teenager.

‘I don’t like being talked down to,’ he explained, offering the vacant chair to their host.

The woman leant against it, rolling her eyes. ‘Your ignorance makes that an outcome quite impossible to avoid, whatever the seating arrangements. Another man who can’t abide a woman in authority. It’s so very dull and predictable.’

‘I don’t care what your gender is, or even what your status is,’ replied the Doctor, deeply offended by the insinuation. ‘You could be the President of the United States and I’d still say exactly the same.’

‘That I can almost believe,’ the woman conceded, quietly admiring the bravado of a man confident enough to wear the outfit of a Victorian aristocrat.

‘So come on then, give us the inside story,’ the Doctor pressed.

‘The inside story?’

The Doctor’s eyes looked like they were about to pop out as he stared at her and grinned.

‘Tell me about the aliens...’

* * *

With no sign of the lizard people, Barney easily reached the front entrance of the tent, but just in case any of them showed up, he was holding Chuckaboo with two hands as if the cane were a gun. He pressed various buttons on Chuckaboo to no effect. Seeing them had reassured him that this wasn’t magic, it was just some alien

technology the Doctor had been using to make him look like he possessed supernatural powers. ‘Always the trickster,’ he muttered. ‘If there’s any trouble in there, you better start working,’ he grunted. ‘I don’t care what the Doctor says. You can fire lasers.’

Barney jostled his way through the clear lines of sheeting that made up the door until he was stood inside the tent. At first he was reassured. The place was like a vast hospital ward, just as Varne had described. Perhaps the Doctor was right and these aliens were trying to help. The first hint of doubt was the label hanging from the ceiling between the strange lights: SURPLUS ROOM. But then he saw the body-bags lying on the beds. Frantically he started to open them one by one, looking for Jack. He was still checking them when the lizard creature from earlier stepped inside. Hearing the rustle from the entrance, Barney turned around and pointed Chuckaboo at the creature.

‘Don’t come any closer, or I’ll shoot,’ he shouted. ‘Where’s my son? Are they all dead?’

‘How old is your son?’ asked the creature calmly.

‘He’s seventeen. A little taller than me, blond, short hair. His name is Jack Forrester.’

‘Then he is alive. Probably.’

‘Probably? What the hell is going on here? What are you doing on my planet?’

The creature walked forward towards him.

‘I mean it! Stay back or I’ll shoot.’

The thing didn’t even hesitate as, laughing manically, it pushed half a dozen beds aside in order to get to Barney via the shortest possible route. The creature wasn’t acting out of some kind of animalistic instinct, this was all for dramatic effect, thought Barney.

Frantically, he pressed various buttons on Chuckaboo.

The creature laughed as the cane emitted a series of harmless lights and beeps. The most dramatic things got was when the cane scattered a shower of multi-coloured confetti across the room.

‘It’s a shame. You would have made a great fighter,’ said the

creature, nonchalantly throwing Chuckaboo across the room. It positioned itself right up against Barney. ‘But you are too old to be of any further service to the Birastrop.’ With glee, as if it had missed being physically violent, the creature grabbed Barney’s throat, and repeatedly tightened and loosened his grip.

‘Get it over with,’ coughed Barney. ‘If you’re gonna kill me, do it now.’

‘Where’s the fun in that? I want to see you squirm,’ replied the creature, its breath almost as deadly as its grip.

‘I don’t care if I die. I just want to know my son is OK,’ spluttered Barney.

The creature suddenly let go and tapped on a control panel that appeared to have been wired directly into its right forearm.

‘The condemned man’s last request. A verified human tradition. However strange they sound, and no matter the inconvenience they may cause, the Birastrop code demands that we respect the traditions of any alien we are duty-bound to kill.’

It dragged Barney though a doorway at the back of the room, leading them into a second ward marked DEPLOYMENT ROOM’. Here the beds were empty. Not a single body-bag in sight.

‘Your son would have been in this ward,’ said the creature. ‘If he was dead, he would still be lying on a bed here. I can’t guarantee he will survive the night, but for now he should be alive.’

‘Then the Doctor will save him from anything you lot have planned,’ said Barney. ‘Chuckaboo, report back to the Doctor!’ he shouted more in hope than expectation.

‘I am the doctor and this is my field hospital,’ said the creature. ‘Who is this Chuckaboo? I’d be more than happy to meet him.’

There was no point trying to explain. With no way out, Barney walked straight up to the monster. ‘Do it. Do it now. My wife is gone. My son, if he is really still alive, is old enough to take care of himself. I’ve nothing left to lose.’

‘It’s too easy.’ The creature sounded almost disappointed. ‘I never kill on demand.’

‘Well, I’m not fighting you. So you’re stuck with me,’ said Barney.

The creature roared in anger, until after a shake of the head, he took out a firecracker from his knapsack. ‘It is better you join the others. I’m not wasting my energy on a pathetic specimen like you.’ Standing by the entrance to the other ward, it lit the firecracker and threw it at Barney.

* * *

The woman in the caravan introduced herself as Ginny Chamberlain, a scientific adviser working for the British government but on the payroll of the military. She explained that the alien creatures, known as the Birastrop, had been offering life-saving support for the injured, while also orbiting the Earth in a fleet of ships, ready to strike should an anticipated invasion force arrive.

‘If what you say is true, how is it I’ve never heard of you, or them?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Why would you?’ Ginny shrugged. ‘That’s the whole point. We specialise in dealing with the unexplained. Mostly by covering it up.’

The Doctor still wasn’t buying it, but he was happy to play along for now. There was one thing he couldn’t resist pointing out, though.

‘Then you can’t be very good at your job.’

‘What makes you say that? We’ve kept the aliens off the front pages, haven’t we?’

‘Because we’d have bumped into each other long ago. I’ve been protecting your planet for centuries without any official help or sanction. And, might I add, doing a fine job of it.’

Ginny decided the Doctor was either insane or a deluded ufologist. It was her turn to call his bluff.

‘In that case, what’s your take on the contaminated firecrackers?’

‘They contain chemicals that are not of this world,’ replied the Doctor without hesitation. ‘Alien terrorism at its most cowardly. The

idea that this could be the prelude to a full scale invasion is a reasonable assumption.'

'Exactly that,' said Ginny. 'The creatures you've seen today are not the enemy. They are serving us.'

'And why would they do that?' said Varne.

'Because we are paying them. Handsomely.'

'This is nonsense, Doctor. We're supposed to believe that the Earth's governments are trying to hide an alien invasion by sending in other aliens to help.'

'Let's hear her out, Varne,' said the Doctor, still eager to mask his own doubts.

'They are not just any alien army,' explained Ginny. 'Using our long-range communication satellites we sent out an SOS with a reward for any species that came to our assistance. The one condition was that they knew our enemy better than we did – that they had intelligence and technology that would turn the probability of success decisively in our favour.'

'And they fitted the bill?' the Doctor asked.

'Not exactly,' said Ginny sheepishly. 'None of the usual suspects wanted to come near this. We are not used to being ignored. We tend to be seen as easy money.'

'So what did the... Birastrop tell you about your enemy?'

'Absolutely nothing,' confessed Ginny. 'We have an arrangement of trust.'

To the Doctor's delight a Birastrop stormed into the caravan, holding Chuckaboo.

'I think you'll find that belongs to me,' he said cheerfully. The Birastrop's nostrils flared as it sized up the Doctor and Varne.

'They are alien spies,' he said to Ginny. 'Leave them to me.'

'Spies? Your paranoia is getting out of hand, Doctor Bartek,' said Ginny, trying to assert her authority. 'They are just worried parents, that's all. Something your kind don't seem to understand.'

'What have you done with Mr Forrester?' demanded Varne.

‘There are more of you?’ said Ginny, not sure who she could trust anymore.

‘Their accomplice was trying to sabotage our equipment. Let me deal with them the same way I dealt with him. If you still value our presence here, you will give the order. Otherwise this mission is aborted.’

The Birastrop pulled the Doctor down from the table, rifled through his pockets, and held up a firecracker. ‘You still think I’m being paranoid?’

* * *

After what seemed like years, Agnes and Jack had sailed to the other side of the red sea in the first of a convoy of self-navigating gunships. They looked back, amazed at the straight line of ships behind them. It looked like the sea had been split into two.

‘The parting of the red sea,’ said Jack. ‘I might not be religious, but I can still remember the stories.’

‘It’ll take an even bigger miracle to reach the fortress,’ said Agnes, sounding sickeningly invigorated by the whole adventure. Ahead of them, something hidden in the smog-filled sky was ripping apart a featureless field with a barrage of firebolts. ‘There’s no place to find cover.’

‘And the bombs are falling too quickly for us to be able to dodge them. It’s just a game of chance,’ said Jack, reeling from the realisation that the field wasn’t completely barren. It was littered with the remains of the dead, in various states of dismemberment and decomposition.

‘Faith, Jack. Have faith. The Lord will guide our path. We can’t turn back now.’

She offered him a strangely wrinkled hand and when he took it Jack noticed that his skin was changing too. They ran into the field, determined not to turn back like the many that were falling around them.

Considering everything else that was going on, the fact that

Agnes was visibly aging was the least of Jack's worries.

'If we do make it, how do we get into the fortress?' he shouted. 'There's nothing in our packs that can help us fly.'

'On the wings of angels,' said Agnes. 'Lord, I believe. Say it with me, Jack. "Lord I believe".'

Jack shouted it with her, not as a cry of faith, but in a vain attempt to mask the screams of the dying.

* * *

'We are aliens like you,' said the Doctor, trying to reason with Bartek. 'Show him, Varne…'

Varne shapeshifted back into his natural Vardian form.

Ginny's immediate reaction was to grab a gun from a drawer under her desk. Making sure it was loaded, she pointed it straight at Varne.

'Permission granted,' she said.

Bartek looked puzzled at first. Clearly, this wasn't the alien he was expecting, but he soon adjusted to the dramatic revelation.

'So they have recruited other species into their game,' he said, pacing the room. 'Let me guess, they promised you the elixir of life?'

The Doctor's face dropped, his worst fears confirmed at the mention of one of his people's darkest secrets.

Bartek looked at him curiously.

'I don't believe it. You are one of them, aren't you? A Face Changer. There's no point denying it, your face betrays the truth.'

'Why the surprise? I thought you knew that already?' said the Doctor. 'You see, Ginny. He didn't genuinely believe we were part of some alien plot to take over the Earth. You decision to trust the Birastrop is looking decidedly foolish.'

Ginny wasn't sure where to point her gun now. Working with the aliens had already made her feel terribly vulnerable, and now she felt completely alone – abandoned even. Her thoughts turned to the

day she received the sealed orders. The United Nations commissioner said she'd been especially selected for the undercover mission, that she was the only candidate to have perfectly matched the required psychological profile for the South of England posting. It had been an offer she could not refuse.

It was only when she'd set up base that she'd learnt her army would be almost entirely made up of aliens. A convenient omission, until there was no turning back. She'd asked about her counterparts in the other emergency facilities across the country, and indeed the entire world, but there was no mechanism for them to confer. It was apparently imperative that their identities should be kept secret even from each other.

She guessed there were hundreds in a similar position. Alone, forced into acts that would challenge MI5's most experienced spies – like executing the driver and his mate, all hoping to God that what they were doing was for the good of humanity. It made a mockery of being told she had passed the most stringent of tests. If she wasn't special, she was expendable, and failure in this case would surely mean that she'd suffer the same fate she'd meted out on the few humans she'd been allowed to recruit.

The Doctor turned his full attention to Bartek. 'What do you know about the elixir?'

'The elixir is a myth,' said Bartek. 'A lie to keep your rulers in power. A falsehood used to crush rebellion and entrap your greatest enemy.'

'Morbius,' said the Doctor. 'This is all about Morbius.'

The name provoked an intriguing reaction from the Birastrop. He bowed his head and uttered an incantation in an alien language.

'The Cult of Morbius,' said the Doctor slowly as the realisation dawned. 'The Birastrop are followers of the Cult of Morbius! Trust him to recruit the most obscure of alien races. So obscure, even *I've* never heard of you.'

* * *

Manduka IV, the most outlying celestial body in the constellation of Kasterborous, made neighbouring Karn look positively luxurious. Even the foremost Birastrop general, Kai Oberon, was eager to leave. That much was clear every time he chaired the War Council, and today was no different.

'More... we need more humans,' he demanded, knowing full well the reaction he would get. Predictably in was his deputy, Scarliff, who acted as spokesperson for the entire council.

'Oberon, we have already recruited 187,000. The risk of our activity in the Sol System being noticed is getting higher by the day.'

'You will address me as General Oberon. I'm not your junior anymore, Scarliff.'

After his exploits on Karn as a rookie fighter turned sole survivor, Oberon had be promoted to the top, bypassing the usual system of ranked progression, the path Scarliff had been on for twenty years.

'General Oberon,' Scarliff repeated through clenched teeth. 'We've extracted as many as we dare.'

'Then spread your wings. Extend the borders of the past and future and bring me more recruits,' said Oberon. 'There must be thousands of wars and natural disasters we have yet to exploit. We keep going until the Face Changers can resist us no more. Remember the prize. Free Morbius and the Birastrop will become all-powerful.'

For centuries, the Birastrop's oppressors had been exiling their most notorious criminals and political revolutionaries to the hellish outpost, keeping them out of sight and out of mind. The majority were simply left to fend for themselves in the wild, but the most feared were incarcerated in the floating fortress, guarded by a menagerie of fearsome alien beasts, an array of technological traps, and even the mystical effects of the departed.

'It's Karn all over again. Only this time, we are having to rely on novices,' said Scarliff, blissfully unaware of the irony of his comment.

'You think we'd be better off on Karn, with the foreign mercenaries and religious communities who stayed behind to find our lord? What reason is there to doubt that he is here?'

After the revolution on Karn had been brought to a decisive end, rumours were rife as to the fate of the rebel leader Morbius. His followers became even more determined to fight for the cause, raising him to the status of a god. But the Cult of Morbius was far from the unity it had once been. Some branches believed their hero was still alive on Karn, others that he had been exiled to Manduka. The Birastrop were very much of the latter persuasion, or so Oberon thought.

'It doesn't matter where he is,' said Scarliff. 'When will you realise that enough is enough. We have our time-ships now, thanks to your lucky break on Karn. We should be using them to find a world of our own. Face it, Oberon, these humans will never succeed. Either they see through our lies, or their will to live is simply not strong enough.'

The most cynical of all of Morbius's followers, the Birastrop were convinced that Karn was a trap, that the rumoured elixir of life had been a typical piece of Face Changer misdirection. After their own attempts to rescue Morbius had ended in disaster, under Oberon's leadership, the Birastrop had adopted a similar ruse themselves on Manduka to ensure the cooperation of the humans. The failure of the Birastrop-led invasion of Manduka had been compounded by the news that their home planet had gone supernova. The Birastrop were refugees now, and could ill afford to lose more of their warriors.

'The Birastrop deserve better than a new Birastropia, Scarliff. Morbius promised us entire galaxies to rule. Under his leadership we will no longer be dependent on a single dying world. We will colonise all of time and space. Look, I want to leave this godforsaken rock as much as the rest of you. And yes, the human solution is hardly ideal. But no other species is better suited to the task.'

'Apart from the fact we have to augment their lungs, and keep replacing them because of how quickly their inferior bodies age here,' snarled Scarliff.

'Remember what our master told us… that the ingenuity of the human race sets them apart, however pathetic they appear. They will come good.'

Scarliff bowed his head.

‘In Morbius we trust,’ he said, unconvincingly.

‘On Karn, there were but a handful of us, insignificant compared to the others in Morbius’s army. The Face Changers hadn’t even heard of us. Now we have risen to a place of prominence in the Cult, we sit at the head of the table as Morbius’s most faithful ones. That is progress, Scarliff, and that is what keeps me believing. We have come so far, we can’t turn back now.’

* * *

Bartek had taken the Doctor prisoner, leaving Ginny to dispose of Varne. A Face Changer hostage would surely prove useful and go down well with General Oberon. But the Face Changers’ involvement in the attack on Earth was a troubling development. He needed answers first. Why would Face Changers be attempting a conquest of Earth? It was entirely out of keeping with their non-intervention policy, and the very reason Morbius had led the rebellion on Karn.

The army trucks were all cloaked Birastrop vessels, realised the Doctor, after two of Bartek’s heavies had escorted him inside what was presumably the command ship. With this one significantly bigger on the inside than the outside, the entire fleet had clearly been modified using stolen TARDIS parts. Once on board, the Doctor was immediately contained in an energy field on the command deck, unable to move outside what to a human onlooker would appear to be column of flickering red and green dust particles. It was an old-fashioned device, an inhumane form of imprisonment that must have been of Birastrop origin.

‘You should have gone the full distance and added a… what is it you call us? Ah, yes, Face Changers – so quaint, and yet so very wrong… well, you should have added a Face Changer containment cell to your ship. At least I’d have been able to sit down.’

The Birastrop all ignored him. Judging by the frantic activity and comings and goings, they seemed to be getting ready to leave the Earth.

‘Going somewhere nice?’ asked the Doctor. He scanned the room for exit points. It would have been an easy escape had Chuckaboo not

been left discarded in Ginny's caravan.

* * *

'Please,' said Varne pleading with Ginny, who was stood in front of him, her finger twitching on the trigger of her gun. 'Can't you see, these creatures are playing you? We are not your enemy.'

The noise of engines firing up outside added urgency to Varne's desperate attempts to get Ginny to see sense.

'If they really have been healing your patients, shouldn't we be checking in on them? It looks to me like your alien medics have left you to it.'

'There've been enough killings already,' said Ginny, still haunted by the execution of the driver and his mate. 'But I can't just let you go.'

She looked relieved to see the ships depart, a fact that Varne knew he could use to his advantage.

'I'm going nowhere anyway,' he said. 'Not until I know my friends are OK.'

'Very well, but no funny business,' said Ginny. Varne smiled and walked over to Chuckaboo. 'I don't think so,' Ginny added. She took the cane and ushered Varne out at gunpoint.

* * *

The power had gone out in the hospital, leaving it eerily quiet and dark. Ginny, unwilling to drop Chuckaboo or the gun, directed Varne to a flashlight on a table at the entrance.

'They are all dead,' shouted Varne as he moved the beam of light around all the body bags. 'Is that what you wanted?'

'Open one,' said Ginny.

Varne unzipped the bag on the bed nearest them. The body was unnaturally blue, even for a dead man. Varne looked at his hand, sure enough it was the same shade of blue the firecracker had left on him.

‘Surely now you believe me?’

‘Try the other room,’ said Ginny.

She was puzzled by the lack of bodies in the second ward. ‘What happened to them?’

Varne went straight for the beds that he and Jack had been occupying when he’d woken up.

Suddenly a figure in the shadows charged at Ginny from behind, knocking the gun out of her hand. Varne took the opportunity to wrestle Chuckaboo off her.

‘Mr Forrester!’

Barney picked up the gun.

‘Who are you and where is my son?’ he demanded.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Ginny. ‘I have no idea, they were supposed to be saving them.’ She grabbed a blanket from the bed and wrapped herself in it. Shaking, broken, her mind completely unable to process what she had been a part of, she couldn’t bear to look at them.

‘She’s telling the truth,’ said Varne. ‘Let her be. What happened? I thought you’d been killed by the Birastrop.’

‘That thing threw one of those firecrackers at me. I saw this snake creature wrap itself around me and then I must have passed out. How do we find Jack now?’

Varne held up Chuckaboo. ‘One time, when I’d got separated from the Doctor, Chuckaboo led me to him. If we find the Doctor, hopefully we can find Jack too.’

* * *

Somehow Jack and Agnes were still alive. Perhaps prayer worked after all, or maybe it had something to do with the dragon that had quite unexpectedly swooped down and lifted them onto its back with one of its huge wings. They held on for dear life as the six-winged scaly creature flew towards the fortress. Unceremoniously it dropped them at the entrance of the levitating prison and headed straight back towards the field, until it fell to its death when a firebolt ripped

through its forked tail.

‘Why us?’ said Jack.

‘It’s not just us, look,’ observed Agnes. The dragons were trying to help them all. Some had already made it, but most of the humans were falling out of the sky as dragon after dragon was hit.

‘We are so close now,’ said Agnes, now looking like she was in her fifties.

‘Why are we aging so fast?’ said Jack. ‘We’re getting closer to the grave than to that elixir.’

‘“I am the Resurrection and the Life,”’ said Agnes. ‘The elixir will restore us, but for now the Lord must be giving us the wisdom of years to survive.’

‘We’re losing brain cells quicker than seconds,’ said Jack. It was time for a reality check. ‘Agnes, this is nothing to do with God. We are on an alien planet, time must work differently here.’

‘Think about it. We’ve travelled miles in a matter of minutes,’ said Agnes. ‘What you say makes no sense.’

‘Whatever,’ said Jack. ‘Let’s just get inside.’

The huge wooden door creaked open, as if answering Jack’s plea and willing them on.

* * *

Bartek’s ship diverted away from the rest of the fleet, all six thousand of them on a mission to find a new time zone in which to extract yet more humans. He landed her on the dark side of Manduka, where Oberon was waiting to greet him.

‘A Face Changer, you say?’ said Oberon.

‘He calls himself the Apostle of the Universe. Says he used to be a friend of Morbius.’

‘Can he be turned?’

‘He won’t talk to me. Just said, “Take me to your leader”, and stood there sulking.’

‘Show me,’ Oberon demanded.

Bartek led Oberon onto the command deck.

The Doctor doffed his hat, but the top of it was singed by the edge of the containment field. He stamped on it to smother the tiny flame.

‘Why are the Face Changers invading planet Earth?’ demanded Oberon.

‘Why indeed,’ said the Doctor, looking forlornly at his squished hat. ‘I’ve been asking myself that very question since I first picked up one of these.’

The Doctor took out a misshapen firecracker from inside the hat.

Oberon glared at Bartek.

‘You didn’t think to search him first?’

‘Oh go easy on him,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s not like I can throw it at you, is it?’

‘The hypocrisy of the Face Changers is sickening. Morbius is made an outcast for wanting to ensure the survival of your species by conquering lesser worlds. How is this invasion of yours any different?’

‘I agree entirely. It’s not my people’s way.’ The Doctor nodded at Oberon as if he was expecting the penny to drop. He winked and nodded again.

‘I don’t have time for this,’ said Oberon. ‘If you’ve been sent to disrupt our plans, you have failed.’

‘What on earth was dear Morbius thinking when he teamed up with you? You’re still not getting it, are you? Morbius and the Apostle, we go way back. I’m here to help you. I take it it was Morbius’ idea to turn to the human race? He recommended the species to me too.’

Finally, the realisation dawned. ‘You’re working for Morbius?’

‘Like I said,’ replied the Doctor, his voice now deadly serious and dark. ‘We go way back. What would Morbius think if he knew how you were treating his best friend?’

‘So you’ve come to help us free him?’

‘“Sizzling Sausages.” No other Face Changer could come up with a name like that. I’ve brought you the best of the human race.’

* * *

A contrite Ginny drove Barney and Varne back to Goose Common. Just as Barney has suspected, the temporary hospital had been in Box Hill. She dropped them off outside Barney’s house.

‘What will you do now?’ said Varne.

Ginny jotted down her address and gave it to Varne. ‘If you do find the Doctor, tell him to come and see me. We are on the same side, you know, but I can’t work for the government any more. I’ve got to go dark for my own safety.’

‘Barney,’ said Varne after Ginny had driven away. ‘Fancy a trip in the Doctor’s TARDIS? She’s parked up in your back yard.’

* * *

Inside the fortress, Jack and Agnes were faced with the most terrifying part of their perilous journey yet. It was like they’d stepped out of time and space, into a dreamlike void. The white backdrop was broken by a blue haze, one that Jack instantly recognised. Sure enough, the dust particles formed into a myriad of snake-like creatures, but unlike the firecracker back in Goose Common, they were accompanied by the whispers of indecipherable voices. Finding their bearings in the void was impossible – they couldn’t tell if they were walking forwards, backwards or up or down.

Eventually the room started to take form and the whispers turned into the noise of a thousand winds. A strange, yet familiar sound for Jack.

He blinked a few times. Could it be?

Sure enough, as the blue snakes returned to billions of dust particles and slowly faded out of existence, they were standing inside the Doctor’s TARDIS.

But it wasn't the Doctor who was holding the cane.

'Varne? Dad?' said Jack. 'Am I glad to see you, but where's the Doctor? What are you doing here, in his TARDIS?'

But Agnes was seeing something quite different. She was back in Neasham Abbey.

'It's not real,' said Varne. 'Don't trust anything you see.'

'Even you?' said Jack.

'You know these men?' asked Agnes. 'Where is Sister Margaret?'

'If we were part of your vision, she wouldn't be able to see us. This is a projection of where you want to be. For me, I'm back on my home world,' said Varne. 'What about you, Mr Forrester?'

Barney was never going to admit what he saw, because right now the one place he wished he could be was with Mabel, afterlife or no afterlife. 'Goose Common of course.'

'That makes no sense. Whoever owns this place has been trying to kill us – why would they suddenly give us something we want?' said Jack.

'Maybe that's the point… to make us feel comfortable, so we leave the fighting to others and miss out on the prize,' Agnes suggested. 'Or maybe the truth is that we sometimes settle for a world of nightmares and lack the vision to be free.'

'All I know is the Doctor's ship is back there because we've only just stepped out of it,' Barney added. 'So whatever this place is, it can't be the TARDIS.'

'Wait,' said Jack. 'How do I look to you?'

The pair of them shrugged. Jack could see that Agnes had suddenly de-aged, back to the pretty young girl he'd met on the hill, he wanted to be sure that this wasn't part of the illusion.

'Battered and bruised, but nothing out of the ordinary,' laughed Barney.

Was it a sign they were winning, thought Jack. That the elixir was almost within reach?

Suddenly the room seemed to shrink from all sides and they

found themselves floating upwards as reality warped around them.

They stopped moving and a new room morphed into view. The floor and walls had the appearance of black marble, giving a claustrophobic feel to the place in marked contrast to the void below. In the centre of the room was a circular stone water feature, with several goblets positioned around its edge. The pool contained a blue viscous liquid that glistened in the light of a mixture of red and blue flames that were underneath it.

'The elixir! You see it too, Jack?' said Agnes excitedly.

Varne noticed that Chuckaboo was reacting oddly to the room. It emitted a new sound, a high pitched tuneful whistle that sounded like a nursery rhyme.

* * *

That very same sound was emitting from one of the Doctor's buttons. Oberon had released him from the containment field, daring to trust him, and together with the rest of the Birastrop War Council they had been surveying the battlefield.

'Dash my buttons, they've done it! Oberon... that is the sound of victory! Morbius is free at last! You can order Bartek to cease all operations on Earth forthwith.'

A dragon flew across the sea and landed in front of them. The Doctor patted its head. 'I knew I could count on you,' he said as the creature opened its wings by way of an invitation. 'Shall we?'

Oberon looked at Scarliff. 'Without faith, we would never have learnt the secrets of time travel,' he said to his ever-sceptical deputy as he joined the Doctor on the back of the dragon.

Scarliff shook his head as they flew away. 'The fool.' He turned to Bartek. 'Get the fleet to travel to the Moon of Sarlik. It's time our people found a new home.'

'But the General?'

'The General is finished.'

* * *

Agnes was the only one who dared to pick up one of the chalices conveniently positioned around the pool. She took a sip of the strange liquid, ignoring Jack's protests.

'Nothing,' she said.

'What were you expecting?' replied Jack.

'This cannot be, unless... unless I was never called to return to Neasham. Maybe the Lord has a higher purpose for me.'

Chuckaboo made a series of excited bleeps and clicks, and seconds later the Doctor walked in with Oberon.

'Is it really you, Doctor?' said Varne.

'Doctor Crocus at your service.' The Doctor looked at Oberon. 'My human alter ego. It's a long story. Varne, Barney, Jack and...,' the Doctor looked quizzically at Agnes, 'and whoever you are. We did it!'

'Where is Morbius?' Oberon demanded.

'Oh, probably somewhere on Karn,' smiled the Doctor. 'Thirsty?' he gestured towards the pool.

'No, this is a Face Changer deception. The elixir is not real.'

The Doctor took Chuckaboo from Varne. 'Hello, my old friend, did you miss me? Now everyone. When I say run...'

While Oberon stared disbelievingly at the flames below, the Doctor lit a firecracker and threw it into the pool.

'Run!'

The sparks from the firecracker reacted with the liquid, forming a giant snake that wrapped itself around Oberon and pulled him into the water. He crashed through the glass base and the flames shot out, causing a massive explosion.

Within the space of a few seconds, the entire fortress had been destroyed.

* * *

The Doctor and his friends had made it into the TARDIS in the nick of time, but there was no sign of Agnes.

'I thought she was with us. We've got to go back for her,' said Jack.

'It's too late now,' replied Varne. 'Who was she anyway?'

'Agnes was born in another century, I couldn't understand half of what she was saying, but deep down we weren't so different, just two kids trying to find our way. She'd have fitted in OK in Goose.'

'I'm sorry, Jack, but this is what it's like travelling with the Doctor,' said Varne. 'Every win leaves a bad aftertaste.'

'I just hope she found her paradise. No wonder you've had enough. I've seen so many die in the most horrible of ways.'

'It's time to get you home, Jack,' said the Doctor sharply, avoiding any eye contact.

* * *

Back in Goose Common, the Doctor knew he would never see the Forresters again. He tried to make light of it.

'Jack, I'm going to let you in on a secret. A tip from the future if you like. Remember, never play with fireworks.'

'Says the man who just blew up an entire castle. Why so mysterious? You could at least tell us who this Morbius was,' Jack replied.

'I prefer to think of what he could have been, let's just leave it at that.'

'Will we be seeing you again, Doctor?' asked Barney.

The Doctor turned and pointed to the police box on the green. 'You'll do just fine without me,' he said.

'Thank goodness for that,' laughed Barney. 'But what about the Birastrop, do you think they'll come back?'

‘If anything, they’ll probably be coming for me, not you. Another reason to keep away.’

The Doctor left Varne to say his own private goodbye to Jack and returned to the TARDIS. He headed straight for his laboratory, anxious to create the prototype firecracker that had presumably started this whole sorry affair. If he truly was behind their production, he was going to make sure he corrected the formula to ensure they were completely harmless to humans. At least it would absolve him of any direct responsibility for the dead bodies back on Earth. Time would have to be rewritten to make the Birastrop their killers.

First he needed to analyse the one he’d kept hold of. If his suspicions were right, the deadly element inside them was something so sacrilegious that surely only Morbius himself would dare to weaponise it. Had Morbius set the whole thing up in the expectation that the Doctor would save him?

To his horror, the deed had already been done. The lab was already filled with boxes labelled ‘Sizzling Sausages’.

‘Varne,’ the Doctor whispered, recalling their earlier conversation about revolution. He should never have left the TARDIS and Chuckaboo with him. ‘What have you done?’

The Doctor was a little taken aback to see Agnes hiding in the corner of the room, praying. It was a good distraction.

‘Agnes isn’t it? Such an old fashioned name. You look more like an Aggie,’ he said, kneeling down beside her. ‘How would you like to travel with me, Aggie? A vacancy has just opened up.’

‘It is God’s will,’ Agnes said.

‘If you say so.’

‘I’m not a substitute for anyone, though. And I answer to no man.’

‘That I can believe.’

‘I may be a novice, but I am also a Culpepper. And as I look into your soul, I can see you need my healing services.’

‘I do?’

‘You are of a melancholy disposition. I can help restore balance

to your soul. I must have space to work in though.' Agnes swept clean one of the tables in the lab and filled it with a selection of grass cuttings and plants from her rucksack.

The Doctor grinned. This was going to be fun. With Agnes completely lost in her self-appointed task, he returned to the console room.

His hand hovered over the TARDIS flight controls. He couldn't bear goodbyes anyway. Varne would be happier on Earth. In the long run. A twinge of guilt made him hesitate. Maybe he should leave Varne's ship behind too. Let him still have a choice about whether he should stay or go.

Choice – is there really such a thing? So many people had died, and the Doctor knew he was ultimately responsible. He had to get back to Manduka to make amends, even if only to take the dragons of Delphini back home. Whether or not Morbius had really been locked away in the fortress, the Doctor would never know. Had he even killed one of his own? Yes, Agnes was right. Melancholy was an understatement. It would take more than a concoction of plants to cure his soul.

* * *

The military leadership of the Doctor's people had learnt in the end that the best way to make use of their prime renegade's services was to completely conceal their involvement. The sooner he found out he was following a directive, the less cooperative he'd become, and those weapons he should be using to bring down their enemies would be very quickly turned against them. It was essential he be left under the impression that he was controlling events. For the most part, they could carry on without him, but the stakes were too high this time.

Once again, the Doctor was required. The trick was always to make the mission irresistible to the young fool, then massage his ego so much that it wouldn't even occur to him that it was all about them. When the truth was finally revealed, it would end with the inevitable exchange of insults, until the Doctor would have to finally concede that this was the price of his freedom.

Sorianius had good reason to doubt that this particular assignment would follow the usual pattern. He'd spent most of the war conference muttering under his breath about how the wretched politicians needed to listen to reason. But as the lords in the red and yellow frocks all stood up to leave, their calm nonchalance pushed him over the edge.

'Have you completely lost your mind? What other military power would attempt to quash a rebellion by sending in another rebel to stop it?'

'We have no choice,' replied Chancellor Mena, literally waving away her field major's protestation. 'The Doctor's fondness for the human race makes him the ideal candidate. He'll do it for them of course, not us... but so be it.' For a moment then, Sorianius sensed genuine emotion in the usually stoical leader. A sadness that oddly personalised the whole sorry situation, given the millions of lives at stake. 'Be prepared, Sorianius, and attend to your troops. The trap has already been set. The Doctor will surely come.'

The royal holograms faded, leaving the field-major alone with his thoughts on the battlefield.

'Then our fate is sealed.'

If the last post was having to take the last resort, defeat seemed inevitable. How could he possibly boost the failing morale of his fighters with any integrity? The thought of losing was too much. Coward that he was, Sorianius was not going to watch his people fall. His hands were shaking as he inputted his final orders into the comms unit, not because of fear or even regret, but because he had already swallowed his own deathworm. It was every fighter for themselves now. A matter of personal choice. But at least the option of an honourable suicide had now been authorised. He and his troops would be transformed into the mysterious spiritual forces that would protect the inner sanctum of the fortress.

Little did he know that plans had already been made to redeploy them.

Firecrackers! It was the chancellor's idea to make the firecrackers and fake a global disaster on Earth in order to lure the Birastrop. Powered by the souls of the departed – the excess energy

from a failed final regeneration – batches would be planted in the Doctor's TARDIS and the rest distributed across the Earth on the day of his scheduled visit.

'One day you will return of your own free will, Doctor,' she said as she knelt down and filled the prototype with the elixir. 'Like it or not, you will always be one of us.'

So that was it, the Doctor realised as the memory dissipated. He'd met followers of Morbius, back when he was this flashy magician.

(If the Doctor had recalled recent events, rather than their being stored in the apparatus' memory buffer, he might have wondered whether one of those Birastrop was the very donor with whose lungs his opponent was currently breathing. But that information was beyond his use now.)

What he did understand was that there was more to life – his own life, at least – than he'd realised. And that could be an advantage. So far, he'd been desperately resisting Morbius's psychic advance, assuming his reserves were limited, but now it seemed he had more cards in his hand.

That wouldn't save him, but it might allow him to last longer, increasing the strain on Morbius's rickety systems. It could give his overheated cranium just that moment or two longer to blow.

And who knew, perhaps these elusive memories might still confer some advantage on the Doctor. There was another face now, the top-hatted poseur having given way to a genial-looking fellow, with deep lines in his face like... well, he couldn't remember now who they reminded him of. This one had a tricorn hat and a pipe, and the Doctor could feel *something around his arm – some kind of shackle.*

Another hidden self, then. Another identity, concealed within his past like a spy in enemy territory. A secret agent.

WHO NEEDS ENEMIES
by Jay Eales

'Of all those in the army close to the commander none is more intimate than the secret agent; of all rewards none more liberal than those given to secret agents; of all matters none is more confidential than those relating to secret operations.' – Sun Tzu

They call me a doctor. Good. I don't feel right at all. They keep insisting I'm home, but I barely recognise the place, at least what they've let me see of it. They treat me like an ally, but it feels like I'm in enemy territory. It's been a long time since I was one of them. My strongest memory of this place is of leaving it.

It starts with them hauling me out of the healing tank, anaesthegel sliding down me as I come blinking into the light. To the bones of me, I'm exhausted. Eyes won't focus at first, grown used to the translucent blur through the tank walls, but eventually things sharpen, blobs become med technicians. It takes three of the medicos to prop me up against the tank wall, legs weak and bow-bent, feet failing to find purchase on the gel-slick tiles. They swaddle me in towels, taking the chill from the air and affording them a better grip. My body twitches and shivers anyway.

Walking is a knack that comes back to me slowly. Not just a hangover from the anaesthegel: these legs are gangly, not my own. We go for a stumble around the ward station, and, after a circuit or two, I relearn the trick of it and the legs bend to my will. One of the medicos keeps checking my vitals. I cough on request; the timbre that emerges is a touch deeper than anticipated, given the chill of their hand. A penlight sets me blinking, unprepared for its sudden appearance, jabbed in my face as it is. Holding up two fingers in front of me while I'm still squinting away the floaters, I give them two fingers back, knowing they won't catch the reference. A beat later, it occurs to me, do I catch the reference? I'm sure it will come back to me in time.

Finally, they're done with their tests. Their voices kept low, I only pick up one word in a handful, but the tone cuts through clear enough. Concern. Frustration. Impatience. They keep mentioning this

doctor, but they don't seem to produce one.

I have only the vaguest recollections of being in a tank like this before. Built to knit flesh, print bone and heal most injuries, given enough time. I've not been left to soak long enough this time, though. Feels as though I'm an egg scooped from the pan too soon. I'm soft-boiled, maybe even scrambled. And you know what comes next when you're a soft-boiled egg? Right on cue, the medstation door crashes open, and in come the soldiers.

* * *

'If ignorant both of your enemy and yourself, you are certain to be in peril.' – Sun Tzu

I'm unceremoniously hustled under armed escort to nearby quarters. Small and impersonal, somewhere the staff go between long shifts, only to sleep, shower and the other 's'. Nowhere you'd choose to spend more time than you had to. Thankfully I'm trusted to shower unaccompanied, and grateful to finally slough off the last of the clammy anaesthegel from my skin. I only notice the ache in my left leg when the massaging jet of warm water starts to relax muscles wound too-tight. No tell-tale scar, but I find I'm automatically favouring the other leg, muscle memory telling me it's an old wound.

When I emerge from the bathroom, the medico whose voice radiated concern is sitting by the bed. Her nametag identifies her as Arco. She seems satisfied that I'm not about to keel over at any moment, indicating that I should get dressed before the guards lose what remains of their patience. Must have been something to witness, whatever it was she said to keep them on the other side of the door. Then I see the view from the tiny window. Though the sheer drop beyond the tiny window ends any thought of flight. Unless you have wings.

Fresh and fancy clothes have been provided, folded on the bed. I reach for my own clothes, heaped on the floor, grunting as I bend to retrieve them.

'*These* are your clothes,' she says, leaving no room for argument. 'Those are *evidence*.'

I look at the stack of new clothes again. There's a waistcoat,

more embroidery than cloth. A powder-blue tailcoat I've never seen in my life before. My clothes? Maybe if I was a children's entertainer. And a wig? I instinctively reach for my hairline. No, not bald. But... sideburns? How long was I in in the tank?

I convince the nurse to find me a hand mirror. She hands it to me reluctantly, like I'm going to find myself hideously scarred or something. I steel myself for a moment, before raising the glass. I'm uncertain right now as to who I am, and the man I'm looking at is as shocked as I am. He's looking at a total stranger.

* * *

'Be extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness. Be extremely mysterious, even to the point of soundlessness. Thereby you can be the director of the opponent's fate.' – Sun Tzu

Just a debriefing, so the guards kept describing it. Nothing to worry about, one of them piped up, trying to reassure, but selling it without conviction. They moved at forced march through the Sequester, and the Doctor could tell by the slight difference in the way their small arms hung that they were heavy. Full loads. Ready for action. Far from the usual protocol.

He had dressed in the clothes laid out for him, against his better judgement. The new gear turned out to be better fitting than he had expected. The waistcoat buttons were a little on the fussy side to his unpractised fingers, but there was no collar chafe at all and the boots, well, they fitted like gloves. Perhaps they really were his after all. He decided that the wig was a step too far, but grew annoyed carrying it almost immediately, so placed it on his head and soon forgot it.

On the march, his gait improved in leaps and bounds. He was barely tripping over his feet at all by the time the debriefing room door hove into view. It bore no identifying signage, but the memory swam back to him without effort.

Inside was much as he remembered. One wall flat and bare, the other hemispherical, with six smooth tapered seats sprouting up from the floor like stalagmites, facing a central point in the room, which was lit like a halo beamed from a recessed ring-light in the ceiling.

Four seats stood vacant, but two did not. He did not recognise either occupant, but that did not trouble him. Faces changed all the time, for one reason or another. Outwardly, they looked like a male elder in a plain amber robe and a younger female similarly dressed in olive green. Neither colour signified their station, but body language told him the male had seniority before he spoke.

The elder coughed, and one of the guards took that as the cue to shove his charge fully into the room. He and his colleagues withdrew, and the door slid shut behind them. In the spotlight, another seat emerged. It looked no more comfortable than the others, and that proved to be the case. He shuffled in place, trying to find the least intolerable position, settling in the end for a lazy sprawl.

'Asset designation "The Doctor", if we may make a start?'

'Don't mind me, sunshine.' The Doctor waved his hand dismissively.

'Debriefing Chain-Osmium-Tetrapeliquin-Chain. Acknowledge, Sentry?'

A genderless voice chimed up from the air: '*//Acknowledged, Director//*'

'In this room, there are no names. You may refer to me as Director, and my colleague...' indicating toward her, 'as Keeper.'

'We would like you, in your own words, to explain the catastrophic failure of your most recent mission.'

'Failure?' the Doctor protested. 'That seems unduly harsh, Director! I mean, I only prevented a big old civil war, and dismantled the war machine of our recently deposed President. I'm not expecting a medal or anything, but failure? With all due respect, old boy, are you off your rocker?' He had undergone hostile mission debriefs before – more often than not, truth be told – but this felt like a first.

'How else should your actions be judged? Your assignment, and correct me if I'm wrong,' the Director said, turning briefly to the Keeper, 'was to undermine the seditious activities of your target and to bring him to justice. You were one element in play to achieve the former, but your primary focus was to capture the General or to remove him from the board.' The Director stood up from his seat and

slowly padded toward the Doctor. He leant forward, though had to strain onto tiptoe to meet the Doctor's eyeline, despite him being seated. 'Remind me, Doctor – how did that work out for you?'

The Doctor fell quiet, shifting uneasily on his seat. The Keeper leant in with calming words, but the Doctor already had enough voices in his head. He needed focus.

'Report, Doctor,' the Director said, 'The circumstances of your infiltration left us unable to rely upon standard surveillance protocols such as the cloudband to corroborate your story. However, I want a point-by-point accounting of the mission and I shall compare it with the Keeper's own report acting as your handler. I assure you, I am an extremely good judge of character. Do not let me catch you in a lie, Doctor.'

'You won't.'

* * *

'Know thy enemy, know thy self. A thousand battles, a thousand victories.' – Sun Tzu

Another detonation. Vibrations from the deck thudding through my boot soles. This one nearer. Aboard the *Incorrigible*, the flagship itself. High Command's secret weapon at work. Some of the dirtiest tactics employed by either side in this civil war. And under my white gloves it feels as if my hands are drenched in gore up to my elbows.

I'm the lynchpin. None of it works without me, embedded at the heart of the operation. Among the most trusted of lieutenants. No one would suspect. Buried so deep, half the time I don't know if I'm me or Bretor Ohm. The things I've seen, the things I've made happen.

I'm the spotter; I select the targets and point the finger, the cue for High Command to transmat a good little soldier into *precisely* the same space. Two bodies suffering the catastrophic trauma of suddenly occupying the space of one, triggering their self-preservation process simultaneously. The outpouring of energies designed for rejuvenation, colliding with each other, creating a chain reaction, massively

multiplying the explosive effect. Miniature suns. Better than any antimatter missile in their arsenal, detonating inside any armour or defences they have. High Command attracts the patriotic sort. Those who'd die for the homeworld. Only problem is, that's just as true for the other side. Theirs was a popular President once. Did we think that deposing him once he became a despot would meet with universal agreement? That he wouldn't retain his supporters, swollen with outrage at the treasonous actions of the High Council to remove their leader from office? But we call them *cultists*. They call *themselves* patriots.

Tell me again that we're on the side of right. Just not while the echoes of exploding patriots are still ringing in my ears. I tell myself that the former President would use these weapons if he'd developed them first.

I punch a needle-thin hole in the comm shield, just for a micro-span, and fire off the final targeting packet. Fourteen decks below me, the last of the General's lieutenants detonates, and the ships power skips a beat before the back-up generators kick back in. That's the signal for me to head for the command deck. Where else would he be? The General. Former President *Morbius*.

Pretty sure that my cover is in tatters, but we've reached the endgame, the pawns all sacrificed. One last play and the game is done. The question is, can I get close enough to checkmate the King?

The assignment is to capture or kill as the last resort, but the loudest voices among High Command would prefer the latter. Me, I'm not sure whether all the time spent walking in Ohm's shoes has given me a different perspective, but I've no intention of making a martyr out of Morbius today. If my cover isn't blown, Bretor Ohm would absolutely head for the bridge. Bretor Ohm would want to be close to his President, to protect him with his life, or to plan the fightback. Ohm is Morbius's staunchest supporter. I'm used to being the smartest man in any room, but Morbius has the biggest brain.

Rising through the decks, the panic is starting to build among the crew. Some are undoubtedly heading for the TARDISes, unaware that I've banjaxed that option for them. Others are simply looking for orders. They see the familiar face I'm wearing and make a beeline. Mostly, they listen to my calm and measured instructions to head to

their stations and await further guidance. Some take more persuasion. I take one aside into a deserted stretch of corridor and *persuade* him, dumping his dead weight out of sight in a convenient locker. I pocket his ID pass just in case my own authority has been cancelled.

A couple of decks higher, and the lighting in the lift starts to flicker. I decamp with some haste, even though that will cost me time. There's a not-inconsequential chance of ship-wide critical systems failures from my sabotage. I don't want to spend my last moments trapped in a rapidly accelerating bullet-coffin freefalling through forty-six decks of turboshaft if the null-grav should give up the ghost.

Eventually, I manage to finagle my way into the access shaft. Oh, for a sonic screwdriver, but I'd never have got it through the security scans. I continue my ascent the old school way, by ladder. My trick knee doesn't thank me for it. Bretor Ohm doesn't have a trick knee, but my muscles remember. The shaft begins to quake, and I have to squeeze myself against the ladder and just cling tightly until the tremors pass. A turbolift hurtles down past me, the manual brakes showering sparks, insufficient for the task. I could tell you I don't hear the screams.

Two more decks to climb, then one. My knee's on fire, but I've no time to indulge it today, so I mute the localised pain receptors and hope for the best.

I kick out the access hatch into the corridor, surprising the crewmember stabbing the button to call the turbolift. She reaches for her sidearm, until recognition dawns. She looks relieved. She shouldn't.

'Lift's out of order,' I growl. She catches my tone and scuttles off. That just leaves me, an empty corridor, and, five paces away, the bridge door. I take a moment to run the most probable scenarios for what waits me on the other side.

The door cycles aside at my approach and I step over the threshold onto the bridge.

What happens next is... *gone*. Trying to recall... is painful. I pick up the barest hint of mumbled conversation, defeating my ability to parse it as anything resembling words. Then everything goes away, and I find myself with a sense of peace like I've never known.

Snatches of deafening noise and flame stab through the silence in jagged slices. Things... *people* keep knocking into me. Screams, alarms and then screams melting into alarms. Waves of heat and frantic movement. It's the flight deck. Everyone's fighting for the last escape pods, a fresh alarm sounding with each one away. Most of the launch tubes are already empty, or the pods destroyed as the ship's hull continues to buckle and vacuum finds a way in. I join the scrum, clubbing down anyone between me and the pod. They are obstacles, nothing more. I don't even keep count for my ledger. As my door slides into the hatch seal, something – some*one* scrabbles fingers around the edge, desperate as I am to get off the flagship, to *survive*. I break the fingers and seal the hatch.

* * *

'Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance.' – Sun Tzu

'How convenient, Doctor,' the Director barked. 'Not only were verifiable actions on your part few and far between, but the moment you're called upon to confront the General, your recollections leave a hole you could pilot that flagship through.'

The Doctor shuffled again. The discomfort wasn't just due to the seat. It wasn't until he began to recount the events leading up to the bridge that he'd become aware that the hole was even there. It was as though his brain had trained itself to gloss over the memory gap until he focussed on it. The initial panic that accompanied his recollection had faded the less he thought about it.

The Keeper spoke up at last. 'If you hadn't insisted on hauling the Doctor from the medstation so hastily, he might have been better able to answer the question, Director.' Her anger was unexpected. 'It's a wonder he's able to recall anything at all.'

'Your excuses won't wash, I'm afraid. Perhaps if the Doctor is struggling to recall, I can help to fill in one or two salient facts for him? Details somehow missing from his account.' The Director rounded on the Doctor once more. 'High Command had a vessel in the area, as close as cloaking technology would allow. Sensors were

active, running patrol sweeps at regular intervals, looking out for any weakness in the shields. We can mark the point at which the sensors finally registered a ping as roughly contiguous with the internal explosion reported by the Doctor. We can take from that information that damage had not only been done to the internal decks, but to the shield array itself. Whether by luck or judgement is unclear.'

'I'm unsure as to the relevance, Director. The Doctor is one of our most experienced field agents, but you seem determined to heap doubt on his achievements at every turn.'

'I mention the sensors because, and with the understanding that analysis is still underway, there were residual particles of artron energy discharged from inside the flagship in the period between the shield failure and the Doctor's period of missing time. Possibly once, more than likely several times.'

'I... the defence was not made aware of that detail, Director.' The Keeper appeared flustered, 'Might I confer with my agent for a –'

'Sentry,' the Director barked, 'Spin up the Keeper's report *Librep Utrophron* for these ears only please. Just the summary, identity designations to be redacted.'

'*//Acknowledged//*' the phantom voice trilled. '*//Standing by//*'

The Director faced the Keeper. 'You are familiar with the report in question?'

'I am,' she replied, her eyes betraying nothing.

'I could just tell you,' the Doctor said, 'I haven't forgotten *everything!*' He threw up his hands in frustration. The Director was obviously intending to go through the motions, reading out a report that they all knew the contents of.

'Sentry, play summary.'

'*//Report Librep Utrophron//Timestamp [REDACTED]// Filed by Agent Designation THE DOCTOR// Received by KEEPER [REDACTED]// Agent report filed using dead drop Nux//Successful retrieval//Ship cradles sabotage a complete success// Agent continues at length about his unmatched intellect//'*

'Dial down the personal opinion please, Sentry.'

‘*//Acknowledged, Director//*’

‘Does the report come to any conclusions about the status of seditionist TARDISes after the Doctor’s actions?’

‘*//Outwardly functional, but if tested, cradle clamps would fail to retract// Dematerialisation circuits would remain dormant due to safety protocols// Agent very smug about this//*’

‘There’s nothing wrong with taking pride in a job well done,’ the Doctor said.

The Director continued. ‘Did the Doctor confirm the number of time ships remaining in an operational condition aboard the flagship, Sentry?’

‘*//Affirmative, Director//*’

‘And that number is?’

‘*//Zero, Director//*’

‘Need I point out for the record that the principal generator of artron energy we are aware of is the TARDISes?’

‘*//No, Director//*’

‘That was a rhetorical question, Sentry,’ the Director sighed.

‘*//Apologies, Director//*’

‘Then, how do we apply this to what we already know? The Doctor files a report stating baldly that he has disabled every TARDIS aboard. He crows about it, at length. I’ve read the full unredacted report. This leaves only the escape pods as a means of escape, with our own fleet waiting to scoop them up like minnowfins.’

‘Yes, yes. I was at the briefing.’

‘And yet, after all this patting yourself on the back, something went awry.’

‘Well…’

‘Something went awry, and the General was able to make his escape. The discharge of artron energy leads us to construe that this escape was by means of a TARDIS.’

The Doctor’s mouth hung open, but no words came out.

‘For once, Doctor, you have no clever aphorisms, no childish insults,’ the Director said, ‘and no defence.’

The Keeper tried to talk to him, but the Doctor raised a hand to request silence while he tore through all the possibilities he could consider.

‘But how could that be? The Doctor’s report, confirmed again by him today, is that he and he alone was responsible for the critical work of sabotaging the TARDISes. But he missed one. Are we to believe that the great secret agent *missed one?* Is it just negligence? Or the work of an enemy agent on behalf of the seditionists? Not merely *playing* the role of a loyalist to the former President. Not playing at all! You,’ he stabbed a finger toward the Doctor, ‘enabled the escape of the greatest threat to our civilisation. And even now, he may be gathering his forces for a counter-offensive.’

‘Steady on, old man,’ the Doctor was on his feet now. He could feel the walls closing in, the teeth of the trap. ‘I did my due diligence. To the best of my knowledge, every TARDIS was cradled together. They like it that way. But it is *possible* that Morbius kept a spare ship somewhere, maybe even on the bridge. A back-up he didn’t even trust to his greatest confidantes. I… I just don’t… *remember*.’

‘It’s all possibles and maybes with you, isn’t it, Doctor,’ The Director sneered and put on a mocking voice, ‘and my favourite, *I don’t remember…*’

‘Director, I don’t care for your tone. You’ve not one whit of evidence to support your hypothesis. If you’re so certain that I’m guilty, then prove it!’

‘I shall, Doctor. I shall! I’ve heard enough. Sentry, I want you to transmat the Doctor directly into a holding cell. This debriefing is now a trial.’

* * *

‘For them to perceive the advantage of defeating the enemy,

they must also have their rewards.’ – Sun Tzu

Shielded against eavesdropping devices and unauthorised transmat signals, the court chamber stood ready for session. The guards, so smart in their crimson armoured regalia, were a completely different squad to his debriefing escort, the Doctor mused on the journey from his holding cell to the court chamber. That was certainly the intelligent approach, given the circumstances, where allegiances were in question.

This particular guard detail was well drilled, but chattier than they ought to have been, the Doctor's ears sharper than they'd credit. He couldn't blame them, in these interesting times. The Capitol was in turmoil, with lines drawn between those who supported the new Council and those who held to the previous regime, so recently swept from office. Every day, more arrests were announced. So far, only sympathisers of the former President Morbius. But that would undoubtedly change.

The Doctor had undertaken assignments on many worlds that had trodden this path before. He knew the direction of travel his own world was seemingly bent upon. Already, the populace were encouraged to keep an eye on their neighbours, reporting whatever the government deemed to be insufficiently patriotic behaviour. At the same time, Morbius fanned the flames of dissent as the king over the water, from whatever bolthole he had fled to. Easy enough to sway numbers in the townships and even the cities that looked on the Capitol with envious eyes. To them Morbius was the President with the twinkle in his eye, who told them that everything was theirs for the taking. A principled man removed from office by a bunch of geriatric pencil-pushers. They never saw the darkness beneath, he thought.

Yet, there was something – only whisper it – *coup*-like about the way the changing of the guard had taken place. Oh yes, justifications had been given, but hollow sounding ones to his ears. He had been off-world when the hammer fell. His handler had chosen to keep developments from him until his return – they were probably all too aware that he would take an opportunity like that to jailbreak his TARDIS and make for the outer reaches of time and space. Again. This time, perhaps it would have worked out. Or perhaps it was a comforting lie he told himself as he counted the bodies, the red in his ledger. Could he wipe away his debt before the end? Or would the

debt just keep growing until he could no longer face the man he had become?

He returned home to a new assignment. A new identity and a new body, though not in the permanent way he might have expected. The boffins of House Gloaming had a new process to test out on their favourite guinea pig. Gloaming, the reason why his heart beat in mono instead of stereo. Always a joy.

Every time he travelled off-world, his horizons broadened. This was the deal, why he agreed to serve. Not from a sense of patriotic duty like some of his colleagues, but a business transaction. A transaction that grew more onerous as time marched on. The job was a choke-chain that they would only let out so far and no further. After each mission, returning home caused his own world to constrict that much more; it was slowly crushing him. Easy to see why resentment started to build within him. And how that might allow him to sympathise, just a little, with someone like Bretor Ohm. That was his way in, watching all the available footage they had of Ohm. Learning to move like him, speak like him, and in time, think like him. And that was the easy part.

They might not have known which rock Morbius had crawled under, but Ohm was another kettle of stiltfish. A clever fellow, but not too clever, he had thought to brazen it out in the Capitol, downplaying his connections to the former President while coordinating a network of sympathisers who could undermine the new regime at Morbius's command. Clever enough to get away with it for some time, but his arrogance had been his undoing. He'd chosen to confide in the wrong person. That was the problem with fanatics like him. They found it so hard to understand that others didn't share their viewpoint. Unlucky for Ohm, but lucky for the security service, who recognised a gift when it was presented to them.

Of course, some voices in the shadows had called for a triggerman, the simplest approach. A staser to the back of the head for Ohm and any like him. A warning to the others to let it go. If we had taken that approach with Morbius, they said, we would not be in the state we find ourselves. Cooler heads prevailed then: after all, staging a coup to remove a despot was one thing, but assassinating a sitting President? Inconceivable. For most, anyway. Sometimes, in the

darkest hour of the night, one of the thoughts the Doctor dwelt upon, along with the quantity of red ink in his ledger, concerned whether, if he had been between assignments, and a shadow come to him in the darkness, had put the staser in his hand and given the word, he would have done the deed?

He didn't like how long it took to come to a decision. And whether, even now, he thought it was the right one. Either way, there would be pots and pots of red ink coming his way.

* * *

'The art of war teaches us to rely not on the likelihood of the enemy not coming, but on our own readiness to receive him; not on the chance of his not attacking, but rather on the fact that we have made our own position unassailable.' – Sun Tzu

Entering the court chamber, clapped in chains, or at least in rigid bar cuffs, the Doctor saw he had an audience, and finally a venue his accoutrements seemed at home in. He must have been becoming more like his old self. Either that, or the clothes were growing on him. The real Bretor Ohm would have been horrified. Once they had safely delivered the defendant to the dock, the guards removed his cuffs and withdrew to the back of the courtroom.

The whole gloomy chamber had been done out in wood panelling, imported by illicit means, it was whispered, from the forests of Angmea, famously time-locked forever during an earlier presidency. The vaulted ceiling was of imposing height, but the subdued lighting invited shadows to encroach from all sides – an oppressive feature of the design, pressing down upon any within its walls. If the chamber was a facial expression, it would have been a frown, daring anyone to make light within its bowers.

The Court Usher called for silence from the braying lords in the gallery, identifiable from their House colours. The Daylight Houses: Cockcrow, Brightening and Noon, making a rare visit to the Sequester, their sunlit demeanour jarring beside their muted contemporaries. The Daylight Houses held no sway here, merely present by sufferance of

the court protocols. This was the domain of the Night Houses. Even House Gloaming had torn themselves away from their bubbling test tubes for a brief sniff of spectacle.

The Doctor gave a cheery thumbs-up gesture to his lot, House Decline, a perfect case of nominative determinism in action, to his mind. They responded with mortified expressions, and immediately cast their eyes down to their laps until they were sure he had stopped drawing attention to them. There was a conspicuous gap where House Aurora should have been, the Doctor noted. Hardly surprising, with Morbius counted among them. Probably keeping their heads down, the few that hadn't done a runner when their President had. Perhaps they feared a sting operation and themselves in the spotlight. For one of the less influential Houses, they had been so proud to see one of their own raised to high office. Celebratory songs had been composed in his honour. They weren't singing anymore.

He allowed himself to be placed in the dock, a hexagonal wooden booth that matched the walls, with sides that reached his waist. A similar booth stood across the chamber from him, where the Procurator would take their place in due course. A lower booth adjoined the dock, where the Pleader, acting as the Doctor's defence counsel, would stand. The focus of the room, of course, was the bench, where the Inquisitor would shortly be parking their posterior. More than a chair, but not quite a throne, it gave the occupant the best view in the house, and rather more comfortably than the debriefing room seats, thank goodness. The Doctor could only imagine the miscarriages of justice that would result from an Inquisitor who'd turned peppery for lack of an appropriately cushioned rump.

The Usher banged his ceremonial rod and called for silence a third time, as was the tradition, because if his people knew about anything in their ridiculously over-extended lifespans, it was pomp and circumstance. They absolutely went crazy for all that regalia, simply could not get enough of it.

When the sound from the rod stopped reverberating around the chamber, the Usher took his place beside the court guards, at the back of the gallery.

There was a single rap on the ornately carved door to the chamber, swiftly followed by the doors being opened by the court

guard-Captain, identifiable by the faintly ridiculous feather plume sticking out of the top of his helmet. He bowed, firstly in order to enter the room without knocking his plume off, and then toward the bench – the Inquisitor's chair – still vacant, but it was a jolly well upholstered chair, so worthy of a bit of obeisance. While the Captain was doing his bowing and scraping, he was flanked by two more robed figures, one in black and the other in green. The Doctor craned his neck around, picking out their familiar faces.

'Director? I'd like to say it's nice to see you again so soon, but perhaps I won't if it's all the same.'

As the prosecuting counsel took his place, he addressed the defendant. 'You are in a court of law now, Doctor. You are to address me as Procurator Efon.'

'Pleader Sellin,' the woman he had previously known as Keeper nodded, by way of greeting, as she stepped into her hexagonal booth.

The Doctor's return greeting was cut off by Procurator Efon's next statement. 'Sellin stepped forward to act as your Pleader, Doctor. I'm sure you'll appreciate her in your corner rather than a randomly appointed official.'

'How interesting,' the Doctor said, 'with the random assignment of Procurators, it should end up being you. I bet you thought you'd won the lottery, Efon.'

'*Procurator* Efon, prisoner,' Efon snarled, 'Need I add contempt of this court to the list of your crimes?'

'Oh, I'm sure you've enough to be getting on with. Shall we crack on?'

'Let's. All rise for the Inquisitor!'

* * *

'He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight.' –
Sun Tzu

All eyes turned to the door behind and to the right of the bench as it

opened, and the Inquisitor took a tentative step into the court room. Leaning heavily upon a guardsman's arm, the Inquisitor was of indeterminable age and even gender, their desiccated walnut skin buried inside a too-large cream robe with pearlescent trim that threatened to swallow them whole at any moment.

Within the hushed chamber, the assemblage followed the Inquisitor's slow procession to the bench, resisting the desire to check their chronometers. All except the Doctor. He was memorising everything he was able to see of the walkway through which the Inquisitor had entered the chamber, before a guard closed the door and took up his post in front of it.

Three entrances led into the court, but only two of them were viable exits. There were the double doors through which the Procurator and Pleader had entered. On a previous occasion, the Doctor had taken this approach. Plenty of possibilities to consider there. There was the door through which the Doctor had most recently been dragged, that led only to the cells. No liberty would be found behind that door. And now there was the Inquisitor's egress. Two options were better than one. The Doctor's gaze passed to the Inquisitor at last.

The traverse to the bench was short, deliberately so, but the Inquisitor took their own time in the traversing, with a great deal of huffing and puffing along the way. Shuffling as though the floor might crack open beneath them, the robe occasionally parted to give a glimpse of worn green slippers beneath, rather than the ornate boots of office made to match the robe. 'Good for you,' thought the Doctor, even though he preferred the boots.

The Inquisitor had no appreciable neck, their head pressed down by the heavy coronet of office; it was a black metal diadem adorned with three triangular gems representing the greatest scions of their race. It was no secret among the Houses that Morbius saw the largest gem as representing himself. If such grandstanding had been taken more seriously in the first place, things might have fared better. But they were where they were.

At last, the Inquisitor reached the bench, to the relief of all, especially the guardsman who had drawn the honour of escort duty that day. With an audible exhalation of pleasure, the Inquisitor

slumped down on the cushioned bench. The Doctor fancied that he saw dust fly from the Inquisitor's lips with the effort of sitting. Safely parked on the bench, everyone else was free to follow suit. The Inquisitor's guard escort adopted an uncomfortable stance, kneeling upon one leg beside the bench to their right, their right arm upon the chair rest, acting as an impromptu stand for their excellency's left arm, too weedy to lift itself under the decorative sleeve.

Opening remarks were exchanged by both Procurator and Pleader, but the Doctor paid next to no attention, distracted by a curious face among the many in the gallery. Familiar, but out of place. He had hair on his chin but none on his head. The House Gloaming lords sat in front of him. As they shifted about, the Doctor managed to get a better view. The man was dressed in an ill-fitting lilac tunic, the word DISSIDENT across his chest. *Brose!* That was his name. A friend, a rarity who had survived his friendship. But here? How? Why? A bowlful of his favourite tobacco blend would have helped unscramble his memories, he was sure of it. But they'd confiscated his pipe straight away. And he was out of practice: Bretor Ohm didn't smoke.

'Wouldn't you agree, Doctor?' The Procurator's voice cut across the Doctor's train of thought.

'Hmm?'

'I was just remarking that your service record speaks for itself.'

'I suppose,' the Doctor said, glancing back to the gallery, but Brose was not to be found, and his place was occupied by a woman in House colours, hair on her head and not on her chin. Efon was speaking again.

'No false modesty, Doctor. Pleader Sellin has painted in broad strokes – within the limitations of the Security Protocols – the great service you have performed on behalf of your people, often at substantial personal cost.' The Procurator gripped the rails on top of his booth. 'I would like to echo her sentiments, and on behalf of the citizens here present, and countless others who will never know the debt they owe you, for your service, *thank you*.'

The Doctor arched an eyebrow, looking for sarcasm, or a trap in Efon's speech, finding none.

'*However*...' Efon continued. 'It would be unreasonable to suggest

that your service was motivated purely by the love of home and hearth.'

'Objection!' Sellin appealed directly to the Inquisitor. 'Is a patriotic act any less patriotic because payment is made?'

The Inquisitor realised that they were being addressed and worry lines joined the many other wrinkles upon their face. They nodded to the guard escort, who obligingly raised the Inquisitor's left arm for them, the heavy brocade cuff too great an effort. The Inquisitor made a weak brushing motion with their fingers toward the Pleader, dismissing her objection. She stood back in her booth.

'I propose to demonstrate to the court that the Doctor's motivations were driven not by love of this world, but in truth by the selfish desire to escape, and to take with him a TARDIS, depriving the homeworld of a vital piece of ordnance.'

The Doctor glowered but remained silent.

'Furthermore, it is on record that while undertaking secret missions, the nature of which cannot be disclosed, the Doctor took steps to break the terms of his service oath by falsifying reports to his Keeper, secretly attempting to reprogramme his TARDIS in order to steal away with it and evade attempts at recapture once he had done so.'

'What relevance has this to the matter at hand?' Pleader Sellin waved her dataslate.

'It speaks to the character of the accused. An agent too valuable to retire, but so untrustworthy that he is only allowed to operate in the field after the fitting of a cloudband.' The Procurator turned to address the gallery, although the Inquisitor appeared equally all at sea. 'For the uninformed,' and rummaging through his pocket, he produced a simple translucent crystal bracelet, 'a *cloudband* is a proprietary monitoring tool used primarily for secret communication between an agent in the field and their Keeper. I won't indulge the court with too much technical detail, but once fitted, it creates a psychic bond between the minds of agent and Keeper, allowing for limited non-verbal communication over incredible distances, without triggering most forms of detection. It cannot easily be removed, short of amputation, and cannot be switched off by the agent.'

The lords sat attentively, except those of House Decline, who were all-too-well acquainted with cloudband technology. Decline produced more than its share of agents who proved unorthodox, unpredictable, *renegade*. Fortunate for them that Morbius was of Aurora. The Daylight Houses appeared more than a little shellshocked by the revelations, sweet summer children that they were.

'We are fortunate to have an expert witness in court today, a Keeper who worked closely with the Doctor on his most recent mission. Pleader Sellin,' Efon turned to her, 'could you confirm something for me?'

Sellin was puzzled. She looked over at the Doctor, who just shrugged.

'Am I correct that when an agent is passed from one Keeper to another, a briefing takes place?'

'Well... it's nothing so formal, but yes. Just a conversation. A chat.'

'Excellent.' Efon smiled. 'And was there a *chat* when the Doctor became your agent?'

'I... believe so.'

'You *believe* so,' Efon repeated slowly. He smiled toward the gallery, inviting them to note the Pleader's evasion. 'And could you give us the gist of their advice, without breaching Security Protocols?'

Sellin looked into the Doctor's face and remained silent.

Efon filled the silence. 'Remember your own oath, Pleader Sellin. You must answer, *truthfully*.'

'He said not to trust him –'

'*Him* being the Doctor?'

'Yes,' Sellin whispered.

'Any other pearls of their wisdom that you can share?'

'He um...' she said, 'he said not to laugh at his jokes.' There was a snort of recognition from the direction of House Decline's seats.

The Inquisitor spoke, loudly enough to attract attention, but too quiet to pick out so much as a word. The wizened head stretched

toward the guard who leaned in close to put an ear to their lips.

'Your Excellency?' Efon asked.

The guard straightened up, letting the Inquisitor's arm drop to the desk. At attention, he cleared his throat and spoke. 'Their Excellency, the Inquisitor says... *get on with it.*'

The Inquisitor nodded vigorously and smacked their lips several times.

'Apologies, your excellency,' the Procurator said, 'As time is of the essence, I have taken the liberty of placing a number of recordings into the record which show the accused employing all the skills at his disposal to deceive his Keeper in service of his own agenda. They are available for review, should you feel that the evidence is not already compelling enough. I will pass to my learned colleague, Pleader Sellin.'

'Your Excellency, and Procurator,' Sellin bowed to each in turn before addressing the gallery. 'In order to demonstrate to the court that this trial is unfairly biased in favour of the prosecution, I feel it is necessary to show elements of the procedure that the Doctor was subjected to prior to his most recent assignment. By revealing the lengths that he was willing to go to in order to achieve the mission objectives, it will be clear that the portrait that Procurator Efon paints is a poor likeness.' She turned back to the Inquisitor. 'Do I have the court's indulgence?'

Speaking through their escort, the Inquisitor replied: 'Tread softly.'

* * *

'Balk the enemy's power; force him to reveal himself.' –
Sun Tzu

Bretor Ohm walking the streets of Low Town. Bretor Ohm dashing for an early transitube. Scoping out a barroom booth outside the sweep of every cam. Bretor Ohm sleeping. So many hours of footage of broken sleep and starfishing across his bed the way only those unused to

sharing a bed did. Every bit of intel that the Sequester could gather at little notice, the Doctor watched it all. Sometimes at double or even triple speed.

The particular way Ohm ate a ripe plumple, nipping at the top with his teeth before plucking and discarding the stone with thumb and forefinger. The Doctor grew sick of plumples as he perfected that tweezering motion, until he could do it without a thought.

Try as he might, he couldn't get the walk right. His centre of gravity was too far from the ground. The rhythm was off. It would be easier later, but, they assured him, the new process would go more smoothly if he laid the groundwork first. There were limits though. Ohm was a couple of heads shorter than him, and clever posture and a rubber mask would barely pass muster at distance. He would need to fool Ohm's closest friends, working and conspiring among them for as long as it took.

By the fourth day saturating himself in Ohm's life, he was almost ready. Walking past a mirror, he did a double take, the reflection not showing him the face he was expecting.

He sat as directed, on the lip of the healtank while the medicos wired him up, pulling tight on the soft cuff straps around each extremity. He paddled his feet in the anaesthegel until they told him not to. Toes were already growing numb when they tipped the nod for him to slide fully into the tank. Initially chilly, within seconds, his body heat brought the gel to an acceptable temperature. He steeled himself for the first breath – always a shock to persuade his body that he wasn't going to drown. His stats spiked and limbs went into spasm for a couple of spans, and then grew calm. The machines were breathing for him then, as the anaesthegel numbed wherever it reached.

A medtech held up his hand to the glass, fingers wiggling in front of the Doctor's face until they saw his eyes narrow and focus on them. In the tech's other hand, they held up an ovoid control unit, wires training below it, with a big red button. The Doctor stared at the button. He would have pressed it, given the chance. The tech tapped on the glass, getting him to look at the empty hand again. The Doctor nodded, and the tech folded their thumb into their palm, then they did the same with their forefinger. The Doctor understood, which was

why he was surprised when the middle finger curled down and the tech stabbed the button.

The Doctor's body arched as though electrocuted by the energies flooding into him from the cuffs. Tendrils of golden smoke snaked through the tank from his hands and feet, which began to resemble solar batteries. It lasted no more than a micro-span but felt much longer. As the Doctor's vision returned, he attempted to glare at the medtech, who pressed the button again. And again. Between bursts, images of Bretor Ohm swam into his mind. Walking Ohm, drinking Ohm, plumple-eating Ohm. Sleeping Ohm.

The Doctor didn't sleep. Sometimes, he faked it in company or under the gaze of spy cameras, but when he could drop his guard, he did without. Bretor Ohm slept, and when he did, he dreamed. The very reason why the Doctor didn't.

* * *

'Prohibit the taking of omens, and do away with superstitious doubts. Then, until death itself comes, no calamity need be feared.' – Sun Tzu

White corridors stretch into the dark both ahead and behind me. What illumination there is from doorways on either side, is variable, untrustworthy. Ash drifts gently down from a ceiling I can't see, forming a carpet underfoot where it lands on the floor. I've been running for as long as I can recall, but as I reach each open doorway, the doors slam shut in my face. I turn to see the path I've taken, but the walls lie. They shift, my footprints in the ash now coming out from a wall. I don't catch the walls shifting, but between eyeblinks, they do.

Change of tactics. I stand stock-still while the ash falls more heavily around me, forming peals and drifts. I decide to let the doorways come to me. Eyes tight shut, I turn to my left and walk ahead, with faith enough that I won't collide with a wall that was there a moment ago. One pace, two paces, three. I open my eyes, and the corridor is now a tunnel. Rough-hewn and lit by a fluorescent stream dribbling over the rock surface. There's an end to the tunnel,

but I don't seem to get any nearer.

I'm there. Before me, there's a hooded figure sat behind a table in an alcove. They indicate for me to sit, but there's no chair. So, I sit on the chair.

Shapeless, the burnt orange robe hides them from me. With beringed fingers, they push back the cowl, revealing a young face. She's painted with gold sigils that ring some bells for me, but the face, not so much. I blink, and she's Pleader Sellin. She winks at me, and in an instant, she becomes he – Procurator Efon's sneering face. He produces a nesting doll from his sleeve, handing it to me. The doll is of a bearded man, in a ruff collar, a heuke cloak slung over his shoulder and thigh-high leather boots. I know the face well enough. I twist off his head and tip the next doll into my palm. Ah yes, the shoulder-length hair that I miss to this day.

Oh, Efon's been replaced. I don't know the face behind the wrinkles. A kind-faced nun, her order unfamiliar to me, back hunched from countless devotions. She reaches over and taps the top of the doll to draw me back to it. I keep going, twisting my various heads off and producing a succession of smaller - no, wait, *larger* - dolls from within, while my companion shuffles features of their own. There's my old cellmate, the Falantiri dissident Brose; followed by an anonymous face from Ortmeir. A world I killed, crawling over the ash and bones of the dead to save my own skin. Their faces silently accuse, and I can only accept my guilt.

Six dolls in, I twist and tip out my own facsimile. So strange to see yourself as *merchandise*. There I am in all my blue and gold finery, though face down. I turn the doll in my hand to see my miniature, but the face is mutilated, the lacquered wood gouged and scratched away.

I drop the doll like it's molten. A male hand catches it, but not Efon's. My own– no, *Ohm's* face. He takes pleasure in twisting my head off, tipping the contents into my hand. I feel its weight, but when I look down, my palm is empty.

I wake, validated in my choice to use my time more productively than this. For me there is the tank and the mission. Sleep is for the righteous and the dead.

* * *

'It is essential to seek out enemy agents who have come to conduct espionage against you and to bribe them to serve you. Give them instructions and care for them. That way, doubled agents are recruited and used.' – Sun Tzu

'And that, Inquisitor, is why I believe that this trial should be adjourned until such time as the Doctor is fully fit to stand before the court,' Sellin said.

The Inquisitor sat in consideration, slowly blinking their rheumy eyes. At last, their mouth opened. The guard cocked an ear expectantly.

'Your excellency,' Efon interrupted without apology, 'it is imperative that we proceed without delay. Every wasted moment serves Morbius. We must be allowed to examine the evidence, the Doctor's very memories. For all we know, the healtank may erase all trace of guilt and shred any hope of coming to the truth.'

The Inquisitor sighed, following Efon's lead, denying the Pleader's request for an adjournment. The trial resumed.

'As my first expert witness, I call upon Technician, Third Rank Pel,' Efon said. Guards opened the main doors and an eager young technician barrelled inside, head down, as though intent on reaching his place without tripping over his feet. When he did look up, he was the centre of attention and froze as the Inquisitor's wandering gaze fell on him. A sheaf of translucent green punchcards slid from his hand, which he didn't quite manage to catch before they hit the floor. He profusely apologised, bobbing as he attempted to bow and retrieve the punchcards simultaneously.

'And *breathe*...' the Doctor said, seeing the technician beginning to hyperventilate.

Technician Pel took several measured breaths and gathered himself. The Doctor smiled.

'Might I?' the Doctor asked, pointing hopefully at the fistful of punchcards Pel was clutching too-tightly. Pel looked to the Procurator

for permission, taking his eyeroll as tacit approval, and passed one of the punchcards to the Doctor, who peered at it intently for a moment, then inverted it and peered some more. ‘Most enlightening, hmm?’ He proffered it to Sellin for her thoughts.

Sellin looked blankly at the punchcard, and then at the Doctor. ‘You can read this?’

‘Not so much as a glyph,’ the Doctor whispered before handing it back to the technician with a few words of thanks.

‘May I have my witness back, Doctor?’

‘Of course! Don’t mind me.’

Pel had taken his position on the stand, a hexagonal tile midway between opposing counsels, which glowed with cobalt light when he set foot upon it.

‘Technician Pel,’ Efon began, ‘You are a qualified biodata extrapolator, are you not?’

‘Yes, your excellency,’ he said, too quickly and nervously pitched.

Efon laughed, though in a manner suggesting it was alien to him. ‘Only the Inquisitor is to be addressed as “your excellency”. In my case, Procurator will suffice.’ Efon let the last word hang in the air momentarily, suggesting he might continue with ‘for now’.

Pel stepped back, flushing, causing the tile to darken. He sidled forward again and bit down on his bottom lip. He nervously fiddled with the leather toolbelt strap round his neck, which had become twisted.

‘After Pleader Sellin’s testimony regarding the process that the defendant underwent in preparation for his mission, I requested the preparation of a biodata sample. Technician Pel, do you have that sample?’

‘I do, your... Procurator.’

‘Would you show us the extract I requested, please? I’ve synchronised your scanner with Sentry so that the whole court may see the evidence.’

Pel nodded and fiddled with the buckle of his satchel, producing

a box with a slot on top, just the right shape to insert one of the punchcards. He selected one and inserted it.

'*//Synchronised//*' Sentry's voice filled the chamber, but any echo was swallowed before it could escape. '*//Display activated//*' An apparition appeared above the heads of the court, a globe-shaped light projection, through technological smoke and mirrors, able to display the same image from any viewpoint. The image was a series of vertical green ribbons made of a combination of numbers and glyphs. As the court watched, the ribbons began to dance, intertwining and disentangling from their neighbours.

In his element, Pel's confidence grew. 'This is biodata extract heliotrope-six-ammonite...'

'And an exceptionally handsome extract it is,' said the Doctor.

'...belonging to the Doctor,' Pel continued.

'You'll make me blush,' the Doctor said. Sellin had given up attempting to shush him.

Pel retrieved the Doctor's extract and inserted a second punchcard. 'This extract held on record belongs to Bretor Ohm.' The new sample looked much the same, but in red. The glyphs danced to an infinitesimally different tune, observable only by an expert, or a machinemind such as Sentry.

'And this...' Pel swapped out Ohm's sample for a third, 'is a biodata extract freshly taken from the Doctor today.' The display globe showed a dual-coloured sample with ribbons of green and red. 'For ease of comprehension to the layman – no offence – I colour-coded the biodata chains to identify those of the Doctor in green, and those of Bretor Ohm in red.' Even the citizens of Low Town would have been able to see that these ribbons were not dancing in harmony. This was a dance-off, with red ribbons tangling up the green, and green striking back. While the court watched, a green ribbon flickered and turned red.

'Now *that*,' Pel said nervously, 'shouldn't be happening.'

The Doctor was in serious mode, eyes flickering over the biodata stream. Another ribbon turned red.

Sellin jumped up from her seat. 'This is why it is a matter of

medical necessity that my client be transmatted to a medstation immediately. His condition needs to be stabilised.'

'I think not, Pleader,' Efon said. 'What this evidence reveals is the ugly underneath. A wolf hiding among us.'

'Umm..' Pel said, but Efon and Sellin were intent only on their argument. He raised a hand self-consciously. Again, ignored.

'No further questions for this witness,' Efon said, 'You are dismissed, Technician Pel.'

Pel crammed his assortment of punchcards back into his satchel and scurried from the chamber, glancing at the Doctor momentarily as he passed the dock. Two guardsmen opened the doors as he approached and he did not even slow his pace.

The doors clanged shut, and the Doctor took that as his cue. He exhaled slowly and stood up. He smoothed down the rumples in his brocade waistcoat and cleared his throat loudly enough to cut through the atmosphere.

'With the greatest of respect for Pleader Sellin, I have decided to represent myself from here on.'

Sellin looked across, shocked. 'You're not well enough,' she said.

'Oh, pish-tosh, old stick. Appearances can be deceptive.' He stifled a wince as he stepped out of the dock and after a couple of stretches, he perched against it. He turned to Efon. 'I trust you've no objection?'

Efon smiled. 'Go right ahead, Doctor. Take all the rope you need.'

'I hope you know what you're doing,' Sellin hissed under her breath, then took up one of the vacant House Aurora seats in the gallery.

The Doctor's eyes glittered.

'Okay, firstly,' the Doctor said, 'I should very much like to recall Technician, Third Rank Pel to the stand.'

It took longer this time for the witness to be located and returned to the courtroom, but eventually, Pel made his way back with a little more confidence this time. He remained nervous, but he

did not look surprised by his recall to the stand, unlike the rest of the chamber.

Fiddling with his tricorn hat, the Doctor crammed it on top of his peruke, wig powder snowing onto his shoulders. 'I was looking at those biodata extracts, and something didn't sit right with me. Decidedly rum. Now, I'm no expert, but I know a man who is. And so, I asked Pel here if he'd mind whipping up a fresh batch of punchcards. Terribly helpful fellow, you know? And blow me, he's done it in no time at all, which I'm sure will please the Procurator. Tick-tock, eh?'

The Inquisitor's head started to nod forward into their voluminous robe, attention flagging.

The Doctor noticed, and clapped, jolting them upright once more.

'All this talk about infiltrators in the Capitol, propaganda and disinformation rife, you'll forgive me if I double-check your findings. Pel, will you please show us extract perseid-four-cimarron?'

Pel looked flustered and had to shuffle through the punchcards to locate the Doctor's requested extract. 'I'm sorry? Perseid...?'

'Four-cimarron. *Please*. And would you use the built-in projector, rather than linking to Sentry this time?'

'Ah, um, if I can just...' Pel twiddled with various settings on his biodata reader and a projector emitter flickered into life on the front of the box. The holographic image was rather more rudimentary than previously, but the ghostly image looked much the same, green and red ribbons waging war.

Efon jumped in at once. 'You see? *Exactly* the same. Your desperate attempt to discredit the evidence and harass an expert witness has backfired, Doctor. Or should we be calling you *Bretor Ohm*?'

'Oh, I'm so sorry Procurator,' the Doctor said, and Efon's smile widened. 'Didn't I say? That biodata extract is not mine...' He directed his attention at the Inquisitor, 'It's *Efon's*.'

'Umm...' said Pel, his extract reader jogging about, the image flying madly around the chamber until he located the off switch.

‘*Whaaat?* I’ll see you *Unhoused* for this.’ Efon purpled, the veins on his forehead pulsing angrily, lips spittle-flecked. He made to stride toward the Doctor, but a guardsman was quicker off the mark, moving to intercept and pulling Efon up sharp. Nevertheless, the Doctor had moved from lounging to something more active, ready for fight or flight.

In the gallery, the daylight Houses seemed uneasy, looking to their nighttime brethren and sistren for a lead, but they seemed no wiser. The Doctor thought it would only take one of them to panic and stand up and the whole pack of them would likely rush the exits. The only one among them who remained attentive to the trial was Sellin, who gripped the back of the seat in front.

Efon took another step towards the Doctor, but the guard adjusted his staser grip. Point made and received. Efon’s lip curled and he turned on his heel, facing the Inquisitor instead. ‘Your excellency, the accused has no case. His entire defence is a house of cards built from supposition and flights of fancy. He took advantage of our inability to eavesdrop aboard Morbius’s ship to cover his actions. When pressed on his story, he claimed that he doesn’t remember. When this weak gambit failed, his last desperate throw of the dice was to accuse the accuser in an attempt to derail the trial. This testimony is that of a hostile witness and must be treated as such. I ask for summary judgement, so that we may move to a more *expedient* form of interrogation. Only then shall we get to the root of his treachery.’

Everyone in the court chamber held their breath awaiting the Inquisitor’s decision. The Inquisitor had also been holding their breath, unnoticed for several spans. The guard escort had been holding the Inquisitor’s arm in place all along, but finally thought to look for a pulse and found none. He pushed the Inquisitor’s arm away as though infectious. The Inquisitor lurched to the side and tipped off the bench, a crumpled heap of robes and limbs.

‘Don’t just stand there gawping,’ the Procurator bellowed, ‘fetch a rejuvenation pack! The Inquisitor is at death’s door.’

Efon hurried across to the bench, where he and the escort worked together to sit the elderly judiciary up. The other guards moved away from their fixed posts, unsure what to do until they received orders. The guard captain despatched one of them to run for

a rejuvenation pack as requested, throwing the main doors open. The lords in the gallery started a hubbub, talking among themselves and craning their necks for a better view. Sellin stood up, and it was like a starter pistol going off. House members were jostling each other to get out of their seats, some climbing over the seats in front to make their way onto the chamber floor.

Breathless from his exertions, the guard dashed back into the courtroom with a medical case. The captain slapped him on the shoulder as he went past him to urge him on.

'Quickly, man, give it here,' Efon snapped, reaching for the case from the hyperventilating guardsman.

'*No.*' The guard escort slapped the box away from his comrade, who in shock, dropped it.

'What treachery is this?' Efon rounded on the escort, but the guardsman remained firm. He held up the Inquisitor's arm, revealing an amber bangle loosely hanging off their emaciated wrist.

'It's a DNR bracelet. Do Not Rejuvenate.'

'Oh, the stupid old fool.' Efon's hands fell to his side in defeat. A wail of grief went up from the milling lords.

'Procurator?' Pel's voice cut through the moans. He was still bathed in the light from the witness stand.

'Not now, Technician,' Efon snapped. 'As for you, Doctor –'

The Doctor saw him peer through the moving bodies on the chamber floor, to the dock, where the Doctor had been standing, but stood no longer.

'Seal the chamber,' Efon cried.

Ducking down and pushing into the confused scrum, the Doctor fought his way toward Sellin, and held out his hand. Without hesitation she took it, and they forced their way through the masses to the open doorway. Most of the guards were caught in the crowd, trying to push them back. A glimpse of wig here, a flash of brocade there, gone by the time they had cleared the way to them.

The Doctor whipped off his wig and jammed it onto one of the lords of Cockcrow, who stood up in confusion and was immediately

pounced on, leaving a way clear for the Doctor and Sellin, which they took.

While the guards struggled, Efon tugged the Inquisitor's imprimatur ring off their stiffening finger, slamming it against the seal plate mounted on the armrest. Blast shields crashed down without warning, sealing the exits.

A scream filled the chamber, piercing enough to stop everyone in their tracks. A lord of House Noon lay writhing against the bloodied shield, a victim of poor timing, his left leg separated from the rest of his body. The guardsman who had fetched the medcase finally had a use for it. Retrieving the slightly dented case from the floor, they wasted no time breaking the seal and selecting the cauterising tool within.

'Sentry, sound alarms across the Sequester. Full lockdown protocols. Circulate likenesses of the Doctor and Sellin to all guard squads. They are to be taken alive unless that proves impossible.'

'*//Acknowledged, Inquisitor-Elect//*'

Efon harrumphed at the machinemind's premature term of address but found himself rolling the Inquisitor's ring between his fingers.

'Uh... Procurator?' Pel tapped a finger lightly on the bench, startling Efon.

'What is it?' Efon sighed. 'The trial is adjourned, man.'

'I just wanted to... say, *tried* earlier, but um...' Pel gesticulated at the chaos around them. 'The biodata extract the Doctor asked for. Perseid-four-cimarron. It wasn't yours.'

'I *know*,' Efon rolled his eyes, 'He was just playing for time, waiting for a distraction like this. Anyone could see it was his biodata, just as I said.'

'Well, um...'

* * *

'To fight and conquer in all our battles is not supreme

excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.' – Sun Tzu

Sellin hadn't let go of the Doctor's hand. He had guided them through several corridors before the alarm sounded. The distracting klaxon seemed to knock his confidence as to which of several turns they should take next. He bit his lip, unable to decide.

He felt a tug at his arm.

'My apartments are this way,' Sellin said, 'Habitat Sector. Do you remember the way?'

'Remember... yes, *this* way,' and left it was. This route was a little more off the beaten path, now that the number of fleeing lords ahead of them had petered out. Just the occasional citizen scurrying by with the alarm spurring them on. One stretch of corridor looked much the same as the next, with only the random placement of sofas breaking up the straight lines of the hallway.

'Won't that be the first place they'll look for us?' the Doctor asked.

'We won't be there for long,' Sellin said. 'Just need to collect something and we'll be on our way.'

This Doctor did not trust easily, but something told him he could trust Sellin.

'The opportunity to secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands,' Sellin said.

The Doctor cocked an ear, his expression otherwise blank. He completed the quote automatically: 'but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.'

'You *do* remember,' Sellin said and smiled. 'That's good. You had me worried back there.'

The Doctor smiled back. 'Hail Morbius.'

* * *

'Secret operations are essential in war; upon them the army relies to make its every move.' – Sun Tzu

'Sellin's?' Efon blinked.

'I did try to say,' Pel said, 'I mean, he did ask me for a copy of your extract too. He just called out for the wrong one.'

'We'll lay aside the question of how you were able to access my biodata for now,' Efon said, 'Did you look at it, while you were preparing the samples?' His eyes fixed on Pel's.

'Oh no, Procurator,' Pel said, 'there wasn't time.'

'Good.'

* * *

'He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight.' – Sun Tzu

'Hail Morbius?' Sellin's eyes narrowed to slits and her hand snaked down to her belt.

'Oh well,' the Doctor shrugged, his own eyes twinkling, 'worth a shot.'

Revelation struck Sellin just before the Doctor did. She staggered back against the wall, out for the count. The Doctor confiscated the needler she had been trying to reach, stuffing it into one of his pockets. As he propped her in place, head lolling, he couldn't help but remark that there was never a corridor sofa around when you needed one.

With immaculate timing, a passing scribe ducked into the corridor, attempting to distance himself from the excitement of the alarm for reasons of their own.

Focused on his journey, the scribe almost bundled into the Doctor, skidding to a halt just in time. They looked up at the Doctor's face, and then noticed that he was struggling to hold an unconscious

woman upright against the wall. They looked back to the Doctor, who broke into a smile.

Before he knew it, the scribe had been shanghaied into holding the woman in place while the Doctor held forth. 'I should call a guard if I were you, old stick. Sellin here has a *shocking* number of sins she needs to get off her chest once she wakes up.'

The Doctor strolled off with Sellin's belt purse, leaving the forlorn scribe wrestling with an unconscious stranger's dead weight, and what he might say to a guard if he summoned one.

* * *

'It is only the enlightened ruler and the wise general who will use the highest intelligence of the army for the purposes of spying, and thereby they achieve great results.' – Sun Tzu

It took the Doctor no time at all to find the hidden pocket in the wall of Sellin's purse. It was, after all, part of his skillset. He ran his finger up from the bottom, pushing his prize up – a TARDIS key. If his hands hadn't been occupied, he would have applauded.

On more prominent display in the purse was a mimetal needlegun disguised as a hairbrush. The right musical tone would shift it into its true shape, child's play if he'd got his sonic cane. There was a lesson about becoming too reliant upon tools. He pocketed it anyway.

Finally, there was a keycard – locator-chipped, thank goodness. That would save some time. Thumbing a raised stud on the top of the card, it softly vibrated when facing the direction to proceed. A couple more passageways did the trick. And naturally, another random sofa, just beside the door. It couldn't be, could it? The Doctor brandished the TARDIS key, but no, just a sofa.

Inside the room, he did a cursory sweep of the place. There was no time for a full spin with alarms still filling the air and guards likely to be arriving imminently. The floor layout was much the same as the medico's he'd used when they dragged him from the healtank. Just an

extra door beside the one to the bathroom. Locked, but that was no obstacle for him. Holding the TARDIS key before it, it glittered.

He stepped into the console room. The décor was unimaginatively default, but that was cults for you. Anything beyond a predilection for robes and black candles, and they were so very vanilla, but at least he didn't have to play 'hunt the console' this time.

He was annoyed to find that Sellin had scrubbed the journey logs, so she'd left him no short cuts. He kicked at one of the console side panels, ripping it away with relish. Inside, buried under a tangle of wires and junction boxes, was just what he was hoping for. Something Sellin had forgotten or was unaware of. Ferreting it out, it was a sandwiched stack of drive units, with just a simple toggle switch on top. 'Hello, Recall Switch,' he said.

This could go one of two ways, he thought. Option one, and the TARDIS materialised in whatever bolthole Morbius had found to rebuild his forces, hopefully giving the Doctor the element of surprise. Option two, he might step out in the army garrison cradles in the middle of the Capitol. Either way, chances were that whoever clapped eyes on him first wouldn't be pleased to see him.

Weighing up his chances, he toggled the switch and wrenched back the dematerialisation lever. 'Here we go round the mulberry bush!'

As the ship swam through the temporal eddies of the vortex, the constant drone of the time rotor rose and fell, the frequency inducing a meditative state in the Doctor. He had always found travel the best way to shake loose the mental cobwebs. That wasn't all that shook loose this time, with displaced memories slotting into place like the teeth of a trap.

* * *

'The general who wins the battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought. The general who loses makes but few calculations beforehand.' – Sun Tzu

Another detonation. Vibrations from the deck thudding through my boot soles.

I fight my way to the bridge on the *Incorrigible* again. How many times now? I've lost count. I know better than to be standing there when the door cycles aside. Flechettes whip past me into the hall, thudding into the crewman who thought to catch me unawares. Saves me a job.

I toss a couple of flasks across the doorway in quick succession, drawing all the fire. The second burst sounds off, ending with a *krink*. She's jammed it.

Rolling low, I'm ready for the navigator's lunge. He leans forward to poke his head into the hallway, but it puts him off-balance. I drive my boot straight into his midriff, levering him over my head. The sudden pain makes him drop his needler right into my waiting hand. I take a moment to put one between his eyes, then swing blind to empty the rest of the clip into the space where Morbius is standing. *Was* standing. My perfectly placed grouping of needles just totals a scanner.

His truncheon comes down, and I feel my elbow crunch. The needler drops from my senseless fingers. It would take time I don't have to shut down the pain receptors, so I grit teeth and get on with it. Twisting, I avoid a second bludgeoning. Time enough to pull a handful of chaff from my pocket. Friction with the air sets it off, and tiny explosions of dazzling light pop and fizz in his face. I know to look away, but it's a trick he's not seen from me before. Even one-handed, it's no trouble to wrench the truncheon from his grip. I can count on a few seconds before he can see again, before the burning dies down to a tolerable level.

His lieutenant has grown familiar after all these encounters, but I've never heard her name. Both of us too busy shooting and ducking to make introductions. It's her needler that jammed – I take her as disarmed, a lesser threat. Need to take this truncheon to the device Morbius has strapped to his left forearm. It'll take three good strikes to do the job. Two won't get it done. I get one, solidly connecting with the alien technology. I think there's a crack, but might be fooling myself. I go for the second, but Morbius takes the brunt with his own hand. Now, *that* cracks. He howls, his hand instinctively flexes away

from the source of pain. Readying myself for an open target, there's sudden incandescent pain in my back.

Not disarmed at all. I manage to shift my torso so she loses her grip and can't go for a second, I slam my head back, feeling it connect with the bridge of her nose. Her alarmed cry reminds me that Morbius's own moans have stopped. *Too late*. I swing anyway, but he's already on the trigger.

Another detonation. Vibrations from the deck thudding through my boot soles.

I swing the truncheon, but Morbius isn't there. His lieutenant with the newly broken nose isn't there either. The bridge isn't there. I can taste artron energy at the back of my throat. Back to square one *again*. I take as long as I dare to assess the severity of my wounds and apply a foam dressing to lash me together. To process all the strategies I've tried before, to anticipate what countermeasures he'll put in place to stop me this time. He has a pretty good idea what deck I'm on by now, so the first order of business is to be somewhere else when the welcome party arrives. I've tried the turbolift before, knowing I have a while before they're too dangerous to risk, so this time I send it up empty. I hear it ascending three decks before it stops and the shooting starts.

I get hold of a hydrospanner to go with the truncheon. And now I've removed it from my back, I also have a knife.

When I climb out of the turbolift hatch this time, I remember the crewwoman waiting for the lift. She looks at my bloodied appearance and steps back. If she runs, I can't let her raise the alarm. I also know she's packing a needler at the back of her belt. Something she surprised me with a couple of loops ago. I wait to see whether she'll zig or zag. She stabs the lift button more urgently. This time, I just don't warn her.

Her scream as the lift lurches and drops like a stone will remain with me.

With every iteration, the crew play their parts like ghosts, doomed to repeat themselves. Those I've killed times before, live and die again at my hand. Only Morbius and I are free actors, learning engines, adapting to gain or lose advantage with each pass. A slip here

and there, and I know the lieutenant's name is *Sellin*. Like her face, the name rings a distant bell. Her voice most familiar of all. Exhausted, I make a noisy slip-up early in a loop and from then on, he knows my start point.

When the bridge door opens this time, no flechettes are forthcoming. My heart jumps with the thought that they've abandoned ship already. I needn't have worried. Morbius's ego won't let him run away without beating me first. He thinks of this as a game, but he's been playing with the cheat codes. Can I play on that, goad him into a *fair* fight?

'Doctor?' Sellin's voice, calm and reassuring. 'Are you listening?'

Despite myself, I am.

'The opportunity to secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands,' she says.

Despite the danger of giving away my position, the rest of the quotation tumbles from my lips, 'but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.' It's as though my body switches into standby mode. My hydrospanner falls to the deck.

A moment later, Sellin steps from the bridge, eyeing me suspiciously. I not only can't raise my hand to her, I don't want to. She gives me instructions, but most of all to forget. I find myself nodding in confirmation of each.

Morbius joins us. He's wearing anti-chaff lenses this time, after my stunt with the pocket lint. He tells Sellin to hurry. Two more loads should do it. He wants to know why she's bothering with me. Send him back, she says. The plan could still go ahead. He looks doubtful, and comes closer, looking for deception in my eyes. He removes his lenses to make certain.

'Oh, Bretor... The resemblance really is uncanny, isn't it?' He strokes my cheek without producing as much as a twitch. 'Yet, if you said the word, his hands would be around my throat before I could draw another breath.'

'My loyalty is beyond question, President,' Sellin said, 'I've already instructed him to forget all this. We can just put him in a pod and he'll be scooped up along with the others. This will work, trust

me.'

Morbius stood in consideration, flexing his hand that I'd worked over earlier. Then, with practiced skill, he drew the stolen knife from my belt. 'A shame to lose an asset you worked so hard to put in place, but I want no loose ends,' he said and buried the knife in my heart. My mouth formed a surprised O and I collapsed to the deck.

'Take your ship and return, Sellin,' Morbius said, 'Do what you can for those that remain true. I'll see you in the Capitol for my victorious return.'

They left my line of sight. All I could hear was the sound of the *Incorrigible*'s systems beginning to fail. Then, two dematerialisations in quick succession.

I waited a little longer before stumbling to my feet. Never thought I'd have cause to thank the butchers back home for taking one of my hearts. And Morbius picking the wrong one. He'd speared an ersatz heart, non-functional but close enough to pass a scan at a push. Don't get me wrong, a chest wound still comes with a great deal of pain and complications, but nothing I can't walk away from. If I'd got the usual pair of hearts, I'd have bled out before their ships hit the vortex.

Now, did someone mention an escape pod?

* * *

'Hence that general is skilful in attack whose opponent does not know what to defend; and he is skilful in defence whose opponent does not know what to attack.' – Sun Tzu

There was something about travelling through the vortex that energised the Doctor and blew away the cobwebs. He was relieved to find his memories back where they ought to be, more or less, insofar as he was aware. Anything else he'd forgotten for good reason, no doubt.

The TARDIS honked to announce that they'd reached the final destination. He pushed forward the materialisation lever and the ship

shuddered and settled itself in place.

Tapping the exterior sensor panel to make sure the climate was going to be hospitable, even if the people were not, he flicked on the scanner. The screen was blurry and pink. And moving. Twiddling the focus knob, the folds and wrinkles, occasionally an eye, resolved into a face, mostly made up of chin. There was only one man with such superlative style, from his boot-tips to the wig on the top of his head. He was wearing the Doctor's grey ensemble, his second-best togs. He pointed a finger gun at the camera and winked.

'Come outside, old boy! Let me structure your expectations,' his voice crackled over the speaker, but it was definitely *his* voice. The Doctor did as he was bid.

Luckily, this wasn't the Capitol. Nor was it a volcano base full of boilersuit-clad fanatics. What it was, turned out to be a ship's galley. Gleaming metal surfaces on all sides. In its infinite wisdom, the TARDIS had disguised its outer shell as a large refrigerator unit.

'Ah, yes,' the bewigged doppelganger said, 'I managed to shift your landing site to somewhere a bit quieter. No sense us both making the same mistake, eh?'

'So... Are *you?*' the Doctor said, 'Or am *I?*'

'Oh, you poor old thing! Didn't you *realise*?' He patted the Doctor's arm and smiled weakly, but then gave a great barking laugh. 'I had you for a moment there, didn't I?'

The Doctor's face was a mix of relief and annoyance.

Ohm twirled, his coat tails flaring. 'I make this work though, right? Even though it's only...'

'...my *second-best* outfit,' they said in unison.

'Could you imagine,' the Doctor said, 'turning up in the same clothes!'

'Speaking of which,' Ohm pulled off his wig and tossed it to the Doctor, who'd been bare-headed since his trial, 'you should probably have this. My brain starts to overheat after a while.' He gave his head a good scratch now he could get at it.

A hammering started up on the door to the cold store. The

Doctor pointed quizzically.

'Don't mind them,' Ohm said, 'I didn't want the help cluttering up the place before your arrival.'

'Anyway, to business...'

'Yes, to business. I have to confess, it's all a bit embarrassing really.'

'How so?'

'Well, you've come all this way, and you've missed all the fireworks.'

'Morbius?'

'On the way to the Capitol, but not in the way he intended: in chains. Don't fancy his chances much at trial.' Ohm grimaced.

'How did you manage to get here before me, anyway?'

'Ways and means. You understand.'

The crew trapped in the cold store kept banging away, annoying Ohm into dashing across and giving the door a brace of clouts of his own. 'Keep that up and I'll come in there and give you something to shout about!' The cold store fell silent. Satisfied, Ohm returned to the Doctor's side.

'So, you took the scenic route,' Ohm said. 'You know us. We're all about the road less travelled. You got here in the end, that's what matters! And without all the kerfuffle about what you were getting up to, I wouldn't have been able to sneak in the back door while their attention was on you.'

'Bit patronising, old boy. You're saying I was just the distraction.' The Doctor looked crestfallen, playing second fiddle to himself.

'You played the part of yourself perfectly, and so did I. While Sellin was making you over into me, she couldn't resist tinkering with me too, trying to give me some of your edge. A back-up plan never hurts, eh? But she over-egged the pudding. A little of your biodata goes a long way, it seems. Then Morbius went and jumped the gun, and all she had time to do was to bury me away in a cell, a fixer-upper. Me, in a cell, with *your* reputation? You know, I think you've

really rubbed off on me.'

'Thanks,' the Doctor said glumly, 'I think.'

'Cheer up, chum,' Ohm said, 'I've just the ticket to put a smile back on your face.'

'I'm listening.'

'Picture it,' Ohm began, 'here we are, far from home and hearth. I've got an untethered TARDIS with a conveniently absent recall circuit; You seem to be in the same fortunate position. Not a cloudband between us to clue anyone in on where to find us. What do you reckon?'

'What do I reckon?' the Doctor said, 'I reckon if you take the high road and I take the low, we'll show them nothing but a clean pair of heels. Maybe they'll catch up with us and maybe they won't, but I'll take those odds.'

Well, that had been illuminating, if confusing. The Doctor now knew that he had more history with Morbius than he'd assumed. The trouble was that so did Morbius – and while the Doctor's hold on the memory was already loosening as it dissolved, the piecemeal tyrant would retain it.

And clearly, it had made him absolutely furious. Before, as far as he was concerned, the Doctor was just some Time Lord of the modern era. Now, Morbius knew the part he'd played in bringing him down.

At first the Doctor's opponent had been playing merely for the abstract challenge, and to remove an irritating obstacle to his ascension. Now, he was working to destroy an enemy.

Well, it couldn't be helped. The secret agent's face, whether it was really the Doctor's own or the one he'd borrowed from Bretor Ohm, was wiped from the screen, to be replaced at once with a smooth-skinned figure dressed, for some reason, in 25th-century Adjudicators' robes.

That didn't match the memories the Doctor found within his mind of this incarnation. Normally, this individual too had carried a cane, wore velvet, ruffled shirts, a loose cravat and a beard. The Doctor had the inexplicable sense that 'wore' was a particularly apt term for the beard.

There was mystery attached to all these faces, of course, but this one came with deeper riddles. Had this one known Morbius too, perhaps even at the height of his power?

But once again, the Doctor could only grasp at the fragments of this stranger's life as they disintegrated around him.

ADMISSION TO THE UNKNOWN
by Ian McIntire

By the sound of the rattlin', every screw and bolt in the body of the Greyhound bus could stand to be given a half-turn clockwise. I reckoned that if I could turn them all counter-clockwise – just one turn, but somehow all at once – I could leave this bus a heap of spare parts hurtlin' down the interstate.

I think the bus had just left Fulton, and I was ponderin' how much further the money in my pocket could take me, when the billboard went by:

MILLER COUNTY FAIR

SPONSORED BY TRI-STATE GRANGE ASSOCIATION

WITH BERRY & STRAW RIDES AND ATTRACTIONS

There was lots more on the sign, but the bus passed by too quickly for me to take it all in. The billboard did its job with my seatmate, though:

'Now, that looks interesting.'

I turned my head towards the seat next to me. I hadn't noticed anyone sit down there – I guess I'd been in my own little world since I sat down myself. The seat's occupant was wearing a brownish coat with black trousers, and shirt with a bunch of frilly stuff around the neck – couldn't tell if it was a separate tie-thingy or not. 'Gainst the side of the seat, a walking stick was propped, remindin' me of the one Marty carried.

'County fair?' I said, shrugging. 'Dunno. Seen one, seen 'em all, I'd guess.' A bunch of motorcycles passed the bus, humming down the road over the horizon.

'You know, I'm not sure that I've ever actually seen one. In any event, I was referring to one of the attractions: "The Portal of

Transformation!" I believe it was named.'

To me, it sounded like a gussied-up name for a bunch of funhouse mirrors, and I said as much. And let me tell you, if I'd wanted to go back to just sittin' in silence, that was a mistake. The other guy – Doc – didn't seem to know anything about county fairs. Asking me what funhouse mirrors were was just the first move in getting me to describe everything I knew about what was probably happening at the fairground.

'Well, I'm sold,' Doc eventually said. 'Shall we disembark at the next stop, and investigate?' Doc musta' seen my expression shift, because the pitch continued. 'Oh, I wouldn't expect you to join me for free – you clearly have a great deal of knowledge about fairs of this type, so I'd like to pay you to be a local guide of sorts. Unless you've got something else that demands your attention.'

I didn't want to say that I'd only been to one or two fairs in my time, and might not be the best guide because of that. But it was true that I didn't have anywhere else I needed to be. And some extra funds could put a couple extra states 'tween me and Marty. Doc agreed to a pretty decent payout, with half up front, so if things got weird, it wouldn't be too tough to bail.

So at the next stop, Doc and me got off the bus, and started makin' our way to the Miller County fairgrounds.

* * *

When bartenders feel like a customer's had a bit too much of their product, they have the authority to cut those customers off, and not serve them anymore. But until Doc and I visited the Midway, I had no idea funnel cake vendors had the same power. I couldn't tell where all that fried dough was going, but the powdered sugar dusting Doc's beard was proof of how much of a draw it had been.

Although the funnel cake was head and shoulders Doc's favourite food to try, we also sampled corn dogs, cotton candy, sarsaparilla, hushpuppies, and soft-serve ice cream. Doc suggested we investigate the rides afterwards, but I countered that we should give our stomachs a chance to digest what we'd just eaten first. So we went

to the exhibition halls.

The halls were converted barns, and probably the only permanent buildings at the fair. The exhibitions themselves were heavily tilted towards agricultural products – plenty of livestock, including cows, pigs, goats, sheep, chickens. The exhibitors were typically all hoping to win prizes from the local 4-H chapter, so all the livestock and produce tended toward the large side. Other exhibits included baked goods, canned and preserved foods, and – what tended to capture Doc's attention – arts and crafts. Cross-stitch, quilts, wicker, macramé, knitted and crocheted items, all created by local folks hoping for a little wider recognition and appreciation.

I caught up with Doc in the corner of the arts and crafts hall given over to pieces that wouldn't fit in any of the other sections. The 4-H chapter wasn't giving out ribbons for the kind of stuff you'd see in museums, but some of the locals had nonetheless done some paintings and sculptures, and had them displayed here.

A lot of the artwork had religious themes – of the two dozen or so cross-stitch pieces, maybe one or two weren't Bible verses of some type, with at least half being Psalms – so it wasn't all that surprising that the painting that had captured Doc's attention was titled 'The Promise of the Kingdom of Heaven'.

It looked like a cityscape. I sure wasn't familiar with how New York or San Francisco (or even OKC) looked, but that's what sprung to mind for me. Lots of green towers seen from impossibly far away, with tiny robed figures walking or flying between them. Just a lot of supposedly well-meaning power, with all us mortals way beneath their notice.

Doc was just staring. I ain't never been one to feel like silences need to get filled up with words, but I started to feel like Doc needed something to break the spell that was keeping us there. So's I said 'Neat'.

That did it, at any rate. Doc blinked awake, looked at me and said, 'Sorry, miles away. Yes, it does look quite neat. I think the artist was a big fan of *The Wizard of Oz*. Emerald City, and so on.'

I said 'Mmm,' like I was agreeing, although I had no idea what Doc was talking about. Like I said, though, the spell had been broken,

and Doc led us out into the sunshine.

* * *

Our next stop was a fenced-in field just outside the livestock exhibition hall. A single cow stood in the middle of the pasture, chewing its cud and looking at us like we were the intruders. The fence was sectioned off with numbers from one to twenty along the north and south fences, and letters from A to T along the other two. Against each corner of the fence was a sign proudly labelled 'Rules of Cow Chip Poker'. Doc read it, laughed, and insisted on putting in a bet. 'Might be more accurate to call it "Poo-lette," but I suppose "Cow Chip Poker" has its own poetry.'

To place the bet, we had to head back to the main entrance, where the woman at the information booth sold us a raffle ticket and a wooden coin. On one side of the coin was a cow's head, and on the other... well, if you'd guessed 'tails', you wouldn't have been too far off. Doc grabbed a stubby pencil, and filled out the necessary bet information on the ticket. Upon receiving the filled-out ticket, the woman in the booth initialled it, tore off the top copy, and handed the carbon copy from underneath back to Doc.

While this was happening, I saw a way to earn my pay as guide. A poster advertising a specific attraction had been stuck against the side of the information booth.

The Portal of Transformation!

Come and Meet the New You!

Seating opens sunset at the Main Event Tent

Admission: Free*

Below the text was a picture of a stone archway, with weird

markings all over it. I called Doc over to take a look. 'Hmmm.... That dangling asterisk could be a concern. And that's a nonsensical jumble of alphabets scrawled on the arch. But whatever the case, we've got plenty of time to kill before sunset... and I don't know about you, but I'm awfully curious about what a "Tilt-a-Whirl" is.'

* * *

We went on a bunch of the rides – 'Purely for scientific purposes, of course' – before we eventually made it to the Ferris wheel. We clambered onto our assigned car and let the wheel turn its short distance while the next car was loaded with the next group of riders. In fits and starts, the wheel took us backwards, then up, and eventually to the top of the wheel. It was probably the first time I'd been higher up than a building's second floor, and even those were pretty rare 'round where I'd come from. We got a chance to look out over the whole of the fairground, and the countryside surrounding it.

'Reminds me of that painting we saw,' I said. It was maybe the wrong thing to say, since I saw Doc got kind of a sad expression. Readin' people's moods was something I'd learned from bein' around Marty.

'Where is home for you, Jed?' I looked away, feeling guilty. 'Or should I ask, "Where *was* home for you"?'

'Jed's not my real name' I blurted out.

Doc sat back in the seat, nodding. 'No reason it couldn't be. I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry. I just ask because that painting reminded me of home. This is the closest I've been to my home in a very long time. And I came here with a decision to make.'

A decision to make? I steeled myself for a lecture. At this point, all the passengers for this ride on the wheel had been loaded up, and it started spinning non-stop.

We sat in silence for a revolution or two, until Doc said 'Once upon a time...'

* * *

Once upon a time, there was a magical kingdom that sat at the lynchpin of the world. Being at the centre of the world meant that they had responsibilities to attend – namely, holding up the sky above the entire world.

The rulers of this kingdom weren't perfect, but they took their responsibilities seriously. The rest of the world was typically beneath their notice, but they still maintained the sky for everyone in the world: the good and the bad, the full and the empty, the passionate and the indifferent, and of course, the living.

But one day, a new king mounted the throne, and he asked a question no one had ever asked before: why? Why should we hold up the sky for countries, cities, and villages that will never know our names? That will never sing our names in praise? That will never tithe to us? What right do they have to the sky we hold up for them?

Plenty of the new king's advisors had answers for him, but for all his questions, he wasn't interested in answers. He was far more interested in how much of his subjects' anger and resentment he could stir up against people on the other side of the world.

The king was patient, and he soon realised that before he could truly capitalise on that resentment, he'd need to purge his advisors of anyone too critical of his policies. While he may have been spiteful, the king was smart, and recognised that different advisors required different tactics to neutralise. The old and senescent nabobs were honourably retired. The avaricious advisors were bribed into acquiescence. The cowardly councillors were threatened into compliance. The cunning and ruthless courtiers were argued into alliance. Those that still remained opposed to the king's plans... well, I need not mince words with you – they were killed.

But there were a group of advisors who could see which way the wind was blowing, and who chose to make themselves scarce before the king could make them scarcer. Some of them hid themselves away in a nearby convent, but others went a bit further away.

They went beyond the edge of the world. On the other side of the sky, beyond the sun, even. They saw things undreamt of in the kingdom, beings that might cause the wicked king to drop dead in

fear. But the exiled advisors were, they liked to believe, of a more open-minded nature, and relished the chance to explore worlds outside the kingdom's ken. (Is 'kendom' a word? Never mind.) They negotiated a contract on behalf of creatures who huddled around the core of a blue supergiant as though it were the last campfire in Antarctica. They jousted with Death himself, and found him to be a quite reasonable and friendly chap. They drank from the cup of wisdom, and were amazed to discover how much it tasted like grape Nehi. They raised families, and mourned them when time took its due, as it always does. They cultivated judgement, compassion, knowledge and other qualities that they found to be important.

But as time wore on, this cultivation made them think more and more about the kingdom they'd left behind. Questions began percolating in the advisors' minds. How much further along on his programme of warmongering was the wicked king? How many friends were left behind in the kingdom, either dead or waiting for death? How much responsibility did they have to a home that they'd all but disowned?

So, do the advisors go home and resist the wicked king? How should they balance their own wellbeing with that of people in their now-disowned home, and the peoples for which the kingdom had once borne responsibility?

Any thoughts? What would you do?

* * *

We sat in silence for a while, until Doc said, 'Once upon a time...'

'Save it,' I responded.

Doc looked pole-axed. The jaw flapping in surprise reminded me of some of the goldfish that fairgoers could win at the ping-pong ball toss game on the Midway.

I pressed the point: 'I ain't goin' back. There's nothing for me there, and I've done the math: I'd rather take my chances on the road than take 'em with Marty.'

'That – that wasn't what I was –' Doc stammered.

‘Listen, I think I’ve done the job that you hired me for. Pay me what you owe me, and we’ll go our separate ways. Or am I gonna have to cut my losses?’ I stuck my hand out, palm up, and waited. Our turn on the Ferris wheel was over, and passengers below us were being off-loaded.

‘Jed, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to pry into your business. But I don’t think we’re quite done here. I’ll have your fee ready for you at the beer garden at five PM. I hope that’ll suffice.’

One of the rousties lifted the bar across the Ferris wheel car, and I was out like a shot, not looking back.

* * *

The hike back to the bus stop was gonna be a long one, so after I’d put some distance between us, I decided I may as well see if I could get the rest of my money from Doc. Hell, maybe Berry and Straw had a job opening or two that I could fill – running away to join the circus was as good of an idea as any, even if Berry and Straw weren’t exactly a circus. So I just wandered around the fairground, towards places Doc and me hadn’t been yet. Having just spent a few bits trying to win a human-sized teddy bear from ‘The Wheel of Fortune’, I started hearing a man’s voice speaking really fast, with a distinct rhythm, numbers peppered through his barely comprehensible speech filtered through a loudspeaker.

‘Young man.’

The auctioneer’s voice was coming from inside the biggest tent I’d seen yet at the fair. Looking at the schedule posted outside, the event at the time was an auction of livestock. To either side of the main tent’s entrance, a pair of oversized statues dressed as clowns held the flaps open, posed in a gesture encouraging passers-by to enter.

‘Young man!’

I looked over the schedule a little more closely. The auction was scheduled to run for another hour, followed by the 4-H club awarding prizes for the exhibitions Doc and I had seen earlier. As the poster had established, ‘The Portal of Transformation!’ occupied the ‘Sunset’ slot.

‘Young man! You with the glasses!’ It took me that many repetitions to realise that the guy outside the tent was talking to me. Instead of heading into the auction, I turned to face the man trying to get my attention.

‘Ah, there ya’ are, son! I knew you weren’t *that* far away!’ The man was standing next to the clown statue farthest from me. He was wearing a tall black top hat, a red tailcoat with bright gold piping and buttons, a frilly shirt, white cotton gloves, and a pair of britches tucked into shiny, knee-high boots. In his hand, he held a tightly coiled bullwhip which he used to gesture theatrically throughout our conversation. The last time I’d heard a voice like his, it’d been coming out of a rooster in a Looney Tunes short. His eyes… something was different about his eyes. If pressed, I’d have to say that he was wearing some kind of make-up, but ask me to specifically say what and where, and I couldn’t have told you.

But the thing that really drew my attention were his rings. Every finger had a different ring, and each one had its own unique jewel, setting, and metal. What’s more, the way they caught the light made it look like each individual stone was a slightly different colour whenever they changed position, which the man took pains to do as often as possible. Showmanship, I guess.

‘You have the look of a man who’s seen a lot in his short time on the earth, and the bulk of it at this very fair, am I right? Have you tried your luck at the shooting range yet? Man like you, I’d wager you’re a crack shot, and one I’d want to stay on the right side of, no?’

Here he paused almost imperceptibly, and before I could respond, he continued:

‘Have you tested your wits and your sanity by attending Messrs Berry and Straw’s Exhibition of the Incomprehensible? Have you subjected yourself to the vast panoply of the creation of the Almighty, and asked yourself why a God purporting to be just would allow such things to come into being… or why that same just God might not have blessed you with such uniqueness?

‘Have you subjected yourself to the knuckle-whitening experience of the rollercoaster known only as the Behemoth, and allowed the adrenaline to remind you that you are not merely alive,

but truly living?

Here, his voice dropped to a more conversational tone as he pointed to an older lady passing by, asking me, ‘Have you had a chance to sample the absolute ambrosia that is here embodied as Mrs Comstock’s candied Red Delicious apples?’ Mrs presumably-Comstock blushed in appreciation, nodding to the crowd to indicate that however true the compliment was, she wouldn’t have had the presumption to say so herself.

The man with the rings leaned even closer to me, and even though his voice dropped to a whisper, I could tell that everyone whose attention had been drawn by his earlier full-throated patter could hear him perfectly.

‘Ah, but there’s one thing I’m confident you haven’t done yet. You’ve not yet faced death. You have yet to look death in the eye and decide if he’s an opponent to be bested to win your life, or if she’s a lover to be embraced after the travails of the longest day of your life, or if it’s to be bargained with for something even more valuable than your life.

‘Or perhaps I should say “your *first* life”.’

And here, he finally gave me a chance to speak. ‘N-no. I haven’t done any of that. Yet.’

The man with the rings grinned knowingly. ‘Well then, my boy, I’ll expect to see you later tonight.’ He tapped the schedule board with his coiled whip, indicating the event in the sunset slot. ‘It’s a daunting prospect to undertake, I know... but even if all you do is watch, I can promise it’ll be a hell of a show.’ He turned away and picked someone else out of the crowd. ‘You there! Young lady!’

I have to admit, I felt a little stunned. I was still on the fence about whether to go to the Portal of Transformation show – I was pretty sure Doc’d be goin’, but I hadn’t decided what I was gonna do after we met up at the beer garden – but after turning a corner, I found myself face to face with a tie-breaker.

‘’Scuse me, but do you have a few moments for a chat?’ She was a woman a few years older than me, holding a notebook and a pencil, dressed in trousers, a simple blouse, and a wide-brimmed hat. ‘I was looking to get your thoughts on the emcee you just talked to.’

Which is how I first met Alex.

* * *

Alexandra Justine Collins spoke with a pronounced Southern accent – I kept expecting her to pepper everything she said with 'Ah do declare,' but was disappointed. She suggested we go to the beer garden for a chat, which I quickly agreed to.

Look, I was young. And yes, I had quickly developed a crush. Please don't judge.

And yeah, maybe I should have made a few connections earlier. In retrospect, the idea that she and Doc had some history with each other maybe should have occurred before we reached the beer garden. I don't have a clear memory of at what point in Alex's and my chat Doc made an appearance, but it was a pretty brief one. So maybe I'll just skip ahead a bit and tell you what happened at five, before I circle back and tell you more about what Alex and I talked about.

At five on the dot, Doc showed up carrying a big paper bag full of things won at the Midway games. 'Here's what I owe you,' Doc said before anything else, holding a wad of cash (and a decent bonus) towards me, folded a little awkwardly. I said thanks, and made one more place at the table we was at. I know Alex and I had gotten on to the topic of 'The Portal of Transformation', since Doc asked if I wouldn't mind holding the bag of stuff until the show. I could look through it and take whatever I wanted, or give it away – anything. (I did look through it, and I didn't recognise anything that wasn't a prize from the Midway. No goldfish, either.)

'You going to the show?' I asked.

Doc frowned a little. 'I've got plans for sunset, but if they have late seating, I might catch the tail end. In fact, if I'm going to make it to my own appointment on time, I should probably be heading out now. Could I borrow Alex for a few minutes? I promise I'll return her in good condition.'

Alex grinned at me and said she'd be right back. I took a few more sips of beer in her absence, but she was only gone long enough for one group looking for seating to give me the stink-eye for seeming

to take up three spaces at the table.

She returned to the table and asked, 'Where were we?' But of course, to get where *she and I* were, *you and I* have to double back a bit, to when Alex and I first arrived at the beer garden.

We each grabbed a beer from the vendor – I think he winked at me, like he could tell my experience with booze was pretty limited, and was happy to be a part of an initiation for me. Once he got a good look at me, he was polite.

Alex got us a table, brushing trash off one that had just become available. We talked about my conversation with the emcee earlier. She told me that she'd been following Berry and Straw on its tour of the countryside, with a focus on 'The Portal of Transformation'. By way of introduction, she mentioned having worked with a guy named Conniff, and taught me a few words in Korean: 'Annyong' meanin' 'Hello' is the one that's always really stuck with me. Her business card said she was a freelance journalist, working out of San Francisco. 'Frisco,' she corrected slyly. 'The locals *hate* when you call it Frisco,' she said with enough relish to top up a condiment bar.

I didn't have a lot to tell her about the emcee's pitch, but she eventually convinced me to let her tag along to the invite I'd been given. I wouldn't get the whole story until afterwards, but the 'Portal' attraction was purporting to be a passage to the afterlife. The key idea was that volunteers entered and supposedly 'died', returning immediately as a reborn version of themself.

'That little old asterisk has a hell of a pedigree. From what I can tell, it's free admission to the event to watch, but admission through the *portal* is whatever worldly possessions the entrant brings with them.'

She told me stories of the people she'd met on the road who'd walked through the portal before tonight: 'I only saw one instance where there were any physiological changes – it was almost all behavioural.' Some people became noticeably kinder, others took risks that they wouldn't have before. Some just took up a new hobby that they'd discovered a passion for, others dissolved or repaired relationships with loved ones. One guy quit his job and moved to, ah, Frisco to join up with the beat movement (which is what had put Alex

on to the story to begin with).

'Everyone who's been through the portal emerges fundamentally changed in one way or another, but they almost all say it's for the better. The level of satisfaction dips down a bit when you start asking friends and acquaintances, but hey, different strokes for different folks, right?'

She went into more detail about the one time she'd seen physiological effects: 'Sarah Mather, just outside of Pittsburgh. Last year, she got a diagnosis of inoperable lung cancer. She did a course of chemotherapy, but that stuff's always a roll of the dice – it can ravage your body more than the cancer could, which is what happened with Sarah. Back in May, she goes to the doctor, who tells her that the tumour is pretty much unchanged, and she'd likely be dead by August. Week after, she goes through the portal, and comes back out looking hale and hearty. Next doctor's appointment, he tells her that the tumour is still there, even if the side effects from the chemo have been wiped away. She made it to September, but her family's all convinced that the portal gave her the chance to have that time in comfort and peace, instead of pain and illness. I never talked to her in person, though – few days too late.'

Any instances where the transformation wasn't so beneficial? 'Banker near Springfield – call him Smith. The guy'd always been notorious for looking for loopholes in whatever agreement he was workin', so's he could get the best deal. He thought he'd go to the event wearing a pickle barrel – literally – and see if he could go through the portal without surrendering any of his worldly possessions. The emcee's never been much of a stickler for preventing that sort of thing – he's apparently happy to let people hand off their wallets or whatever they don't want to lose to family members who stay in the audience. Everybody's got to give up the clothes off their backs, but Berry and Straw provide cheap robes and sandals for people to get back home wearing. Smith here swaps his barrel for the robe, and goes through the portal. Comes back out seemingly unchanged. Only over the next few weeks, he develops an obsession with frogs.'

Frogs?

'Yeah. Forgets to go to work, reads everything the local library

has, starts spending nights in the nearby wetlands categorisin' all the species there. Everything is frogs. He's another one I didn't speak to directly – even his son was pretty tight-lipped, but I gather he upped stakes and moved down to the Everglades, leaving his family and money behind. Son's currently in the process of transferring ownership of the house and Smith's stake in local businesses over to Mrs Smith. Mr Smith is... not expected to return.'

Was she hopin' that I'd go through the portal? Was this the first part of a 'before and after' profile she was lookin' to write?

'It's fundamentally your choice. You and I are talkin' because the emcee singled you out. He's got something of a type. They both do,' she said, gesturing towards the bag Doc had left with me. Then she sighed theatrically and continued. 'I suppose, if I'm bein' honest, I do too.'

So, yeah, that settled it. I still hadn't decided if I wanted to go through the portal, but wild horses couldn't of kept me away from the show itself, if I could sit next to Alex.

She told me we weren't headin' to the show directly, though. 'Doc asked me to run some interference first.'

* * *

The motorcycle club had taken over a small corner of the parking lot. As a group, they were a lot more clean-cut than I was expecting, although there was definitely an exception or two among them. A guy in sunglasses and a leather helmet sat perched atop a bike with his feet on the handlebars. He was reading a well-thumbed paperback whose cover featured a sword-wielding, scantily-clad woman wrestling with some kind of snake monster. Off to the side, another guy with a droopy moustache was showing some clean-cut younger guys the finer points of engine maintenance. Bikes were arrayed around the perimeter of the space, but a big Studebaker was parked just about in the centre. Once we got close enough to their space, a guy with a ducktail haircut stepped up to us, asking 'Can I help you folks?'

Alex peered over his shoulder, but told him, 'I'm lookin' for

Wolf.' Ducktail looked sceptical. 'Tell him, "There's no such thing as bad PR".'

Ducktail paddled over to Droopy Moustache and had a word. DM – Wolf, it turned out – looked up at us, barked a laugh, and headed our way.

'Good to see you, Wolf. Long way from Cheyenne.'

There was a time when I thought playing poker with Wolf would be a good idea, because despite half of everything he said being a variation on, 'I have no idea what you're talking about,' it was pretty damn easy to tell what he actually meant. Lucky for me, I figured out that he was doing it on purpose before he had a chance to clean me out.

'I have no idea what you're talkin' about.' *Good to see you, too, Lexi. And 'long way from Cheyenne' is part of the job description, in case you forgot.*

'So, what brings you boys to town? Shades enter that marmalade of his in the Jams and Jellies competition? "Shades' Marmalades" has a hell of a ring to it.'

'Sorry, you lost me.' *Yeah, Shades is a wizard with those preserves. But we're here for the same reason you are, I'll bet.*

Alex took the opportunity to call out to the paperback reader. 'Hey there, Shades!' Shades kept his attention on his book, but raised an index finger, then pointed it at Alex in recognition. 'Doin' okay?' Shades jutted a thumb skyward. 'How's the book?' Shades stuck his hand out flat, then wobbled it in a 'so-so' manner.

Alex looked over the motorcycle club's campsite. 'Looks like you've had some turnover. Ripper's wife have their baby yet?'

'Dunno.' *Yeah, I'd love to tell you the specifics, but y'know, 'classified'.*

'I never got a chance to tell you how sorry I was about Ironhorse.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.' *I didn't know you'd heard. He always respected you. I'll pass your condolences on to the others, and his family.*

‘Lotta new faces, too.’ Alex gestured toward Ducktail and some of the other less-grizzled club members.

‘Seriously, no idea.’ *Yeah, got some neophytes among us. They’re solid. And we all gotta learn sometime.*

‘Anyway, I wanted to swing by to ask you to steer clear of the Portal show tonight. Jed and I are going to see it, and with all y’all there, might get a little crowded.’

Wolf raised an eyebrow. ‘What are you talking about?’ *Sorry, Lexi, but this kind of business doesn’t fall under the jurisdiction of ‘dibs’.*

‘Look, I’m asking a favour here. If you want to keep eyes on it, I got no objection. I’m just asking for something a little more subtle than your entire… ah, pack.’

Wolf stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. The rest of the club set down whatever they was doing and headed over to us. ‘Boys, I know we talked about going to the “Portal of Transformation” show tonight, but it sounds like Lucy and… Ricky here are already planning on going. So tonight’s show is probably gonna be a little too squaresville for most of our tastes. Well, except maybe for Oliver.’ The club turned to look at Ducktail, who was quickly clapped on the back by Shades. Shades’ chortle made the rest of the club laugh belatedly, but at least it was good-natured. ‘That gonna work for you, Oliver?’

‘Yes sir… ree, bob!’ Oliver responded, trying to temper his enthusiasm.

Another of the Eagle Scouts raised a hand. ‘Are we gonna be doing anything specific instead of going to the show?’

Wolf chuckled. ‘It’s a fair. Bound to be something worth doing. Shades?’

Shades thought for a moment. ‘Wheel of Fortune, maybe? Show turns out to be a bust, we might at least walk away with a teddy bear or three.’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ Wolf declared. He turned back to Alex. ‘So…’ *That gonna work for ya, Lexi? The four of us can hash out the details in my office – which is to say, the Studebaker.*

* * *

By the time Alex, Oliver, and I arrived at the Main Event Tent, someone had re-posed the clown statues so they was standing in front of the entrance, arms crossed. If that wasn't enough, the flaps of the tent were tied tightly closed, preventing the entry of the dozen or so of us who'd arrived before the house opened. Alex took the opportunity to mingle with the crowd, asking what they'd heard about the show, and what inspired them to see it tonight.

Oliver and I took a closer look at the statues. 'Careful,' Oliver said to me. 'I think they might –'

The statues snapped to attention, untying the tent flaps and smoothly returning to the welcoming pose they'd held during the auction earlier that day. Okay, so they wasn't statues. I jumped back several feet and let out a yelp that had a lot of the prospective audience lookin' at me funny. Alex gave me a wink, though, and we all filed into the tent.

It had space for maybe 200 spectators, and it was filling up quickly. Given the size of the tent itself, they'd clearly curtained off a backstage area, and resting against those curtains was the archway shown on the poster, only scaled up to be 10 feet high. Although they had electric spotlights pointing into the archway from behind and above the audience, the space beyond the archway was in complete darkness, with no way to see anything further.

The rest of the stage was empty, to the point where the floor was simply well-trampled turf. Three additional clowns – or maybe these were statues – were positioned at the front of the audience, two either side and one near the central aisle.

Eventually, the lights dimmed, and the audience quietened down. We heard a drumroll, and a spotlight stabbed out from above the stage to illuminate the main entrance. Moving quickly down the aisle was the emcee. He hadn't changed clothes from his ringmaster outfit from earlier, even down to holding the whip. Once he reached the centre of the stage, he thrust out his arms, and the drumroll cut off. Still in the centre of the spotlight, he announced 'LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! CHILDREN OF ALL AGES! WELCOME TO THE

ANTECHAMBER!

'I am your host for the first half of tonight's proceedings, and I must say, I am so gratified to see all of you here today.

'Gratified… but not surprised. Because I guarantee that almost all of you have attended an affair such as this before. In this space, we deal with universal human experiences. Because here, we bid farewell to some of our loved ones. If you have lived and loved, you have lost… or at least, you *will*. Either now, or in the future. And I'm sure I don't need to tell you, that losing a loved one is a challenging undertaking, and we need to help each other through these sorts of challenges. There are two essential truths that will help us persevere –'

And here, the five giant, stone-faced clowns assembled in a semi-circle behind the emcee. 'Number one, before we say goodbye… we must first say hello! Hello!'

There was a smattering of 'Hello's from the crowd, and the emcee held up a hand to his ear. 'I'm sorry, did a family of field mice sneak into the Antechamber this evening? HEL-LO!'

The audience – including the three of us – said a more emphatic 'Hello,' which apparently satisfied the emcee.

'I'll be coming 'round to say some more personal hellos shortly. But before that, essential truth number two…' At this, the clowns behind him moved their arms into a variety of awkward-looking positions. Two were holding their hands a few inches in front of their faces, two had their arms stuck out forward at abdomen level, while the last had his arms not quite clasped in front of his chest and belly, like he was holding on to his necktie on a windy day.

'Saying goodbye should be a party!' The sounds of a Dixieland Jazz band erupted from around him, while the clowns' hands spasmed into motion. It took me a few moments to see that the clowns were aping the movements necessary to play the instruments for the music we was hearing: trumpet, trombone, drums, piano, and clarinet. The emcee patted the arm of the clarinet player, which threw off the music for a second until the clown recovered. All six of them began strolling into the audience.

The emcee, for his part, chatted with audience members, each time beginning his conversation with a cheery 'Hello!' 'It's his way of

sounding out volunteers to go through the portal,' Alex whispered to us. The emcee had a talent for vocal projection, and managed to make himself heard over the sound of the jazz no matter the configuration of himself, the clown musicians, and each listening audience member. His conversations with audience members were all funny, and kept the attention of the rest of the audience easily. Their experiences at the fair were a reliable icebreaker before the emcee probed a bit deeper.

As the music played, it became clear that the emcee's conversation partners were each falling into one of three broad categories: the largest group were here only for the show itself, and had no intention of walking through the portal; a smaller group were on the fence about whether to go through or not; and a handful had to be held back from going through immediately. This last category was mainly folks who'd seen the show before: last night, last week, whenever.

The clown musicians likewise strolled through the audience while the emcee was chatting. As each one drew near, the part of the music that they were ostensibly playing grew louder. A few braver audience members passed their hands through the empty space where the clowns' instruments were suggested to be. If there somehow were instruments in the clowns' hands, they were intangible as well as invisible. The trumpet player approached a group of good ol' boys in the row ahead of us. One of them, dressed in a red gingham shirt, was even bolder than the rest, jostlin' the clown repeatedly so we could all hear how it affected the music. He must have gone too far, because the clown's arms eventually dropped to their side as the trumpet part cut out completely. The clown loomed over Red Gingham, unmistakably threatening. The emcee was suddenly by the clown's side, who then resumed his playing and strolled to another part of the audience. 'Hello, friend! I find it's best not to interfere too much with the musicians – they *really* don't like it, plus we all miss out on their dulcet tones.'

Red Gingham was evidently named Keith. He started out kinda defensive, but the emcee quickly smoothed things over, and it sounded like he'd moved Keith from the largest category into the fence-sitters. After their conversation ended, the emcee turned his attention to us. 'Hello, Jed!' The emcee shot a glance at Doc's bag of

Midway prizes by my feet. ‘Took my advice, did you? Quite a haul, there! Looks like you hit a lot of bullseyes, if I do say so myself.’ I mumbled something about being lucky as he turned his attention to Alex.

‘Hello there, Ms Collins. I’m pleased to see you took me up on my offer to see the show firsthand.’

‘Well, you know me – too inquisitive for my own good.’

The emcee barked a laugh. ‘Couldn’t have said it better! So, does that inquisitiveness extend beyond the portal? Are you curious enough about what might be on the other side to take a single step through?’

‘I’m here as an observer only.’

‘Disappointing. But I suppose it’s just about time to get on with it, isn’t it?' He briefly doffed his top hat, revealing an unruly mop of red hair. Then he held up a hand and clenched his fist. The music stopped as though a plug had been pulled, and from the corner of my eye, I could see the clowns lumber toward the perimeter of the audience, where they’d been at the start of the show. The emcee likewise positioned himself in the centre of the stage, and proclaimed:

‘Folks, if you recall, I mentioned earlier that I’d be your host for the first half of the show. It has been an unutterable delight to have met all of you, and I hope you’ll all think well of me, as I turn you over to my successor. You see, many of the ancients knew secrets about the afterlife – they knew about the concept of the Psychopomp, an individual who would conduct departed souls from the world of life, into the world of death. The Egyptians had Anubis; the Celts, banshees; the Norse, Valkyries. And, of course, the Greeks had –’ he threw out his hand and cracked the whip.

The lights abruptly shut off and back on again, and the man in the centre of the stage concluded ‘– the Ferryman.’

When I think back on that moment, I sometimes call that eyeblink when the lights were off a ‘darkening’. We’ve all been through a thunderstorm in the middle of the night, when it’s completely dark. Then, there’s a flash of lightning, and for the tiniest instant imaginable, everything’s lit up, only to snap back to complete darkness. What happened on that stage was like that, only in reverse. And the lights came back up to reveal a man on the stage who had

changed.

Now I hear you saying, 'They must have had a double for the emcee, who they swapped out in the darkness.' Nope. The moment of darkness was way too short for that, and there was no place for a double to have been squirreled away or for the original man to hide afterwards. The floor was solid dirt, presumably with some grass roots still lurking beneath the range of thousands of tramping feet from over the last few days. There was no fly space set up above the stage, just the bare canvas of the tent. The archway behind him was too far away – even if a double had come from there, we would have seen the tail end of the motion switching them. And we all had a chance to see the Ferryman up close over the next few minutes, just as we'd seen the emcee before, and I'm tellin' ya, it was the *same man*.

What had changed about him in that eyeblink was his costume and his makeup. His original costume was gone, and in its place he now wore a black three-piece suit, a white collared shirt, and a bright red tie and matching lapel flower. He was barefoot.

For a few moments, I thought the whip the emcee had held had been frozen while almost fully unfurled, but no, it was a different thing now. What had been a whip was now a crook – fitting for a ferryman, I guess. The Ferryman loosened his grip on the end of the staff, letting it slide downwards until he held it by the middle.

His hair had changed from a reddish mop to a shock of slicked-back white hair, shaved on the sides. And every visible inch of his skin – face, head, hands and feet – was now covered with either black or white greasepaint, patterned like a skeleton. Fingerbones painted on his hands, toebones on the feet. Black patches on his face mimicking eye sockets and nasal cavities, and vertical lines of black on his white lips for teeth. I heard a bunch of gasps from the audience.

The only articles I could see that hadn't changed were the rings on his fingers, and they were still sparkling with every colour imaginable.

A kid in the audience began to cry, and his parents quickly took him outside.

'Greetings, kind and good people of Miller County and beyond. I am the Ferryman, and I will be your guide for the second half of this

evening's proceedings... and for a select few, your guide to the lands beyond life and death.' His attitude had changed along with everything else, he now seemed serene and comforting, a warm bath to the emcee's bracing splashes of icy water. He'd even dropped the Foghorn Leghorn accent – now he sounded like a preacher at a funeral.

'A fear of death is understandable. The sunlit lands on this side of the gateway are myriad in their pleasures, and a man would have to be long-lived indeed to exhaust those.'

He turned and gestured to the stone archway behind him. 'But passing through this gateway is inevitable. Each and every one of us in this room,' he said, pointing at specific audience members to punctuate each word, 'will be forced to abandon this plane of existence eventually.' His finger came to rest upon his own chest.

'But each of you here have a one-of-a-kind opportunity. This portal is unique – unlike every other doorway to the hereafter, this one swings two ways. A soul steps through this portal,' he gestured behind him, 'And a soul will step back out. You *will* return here, but return changed.'

In the row in front of us, Keith seemed to be getting teased by his friends. I could see it from here – he was being goaded into volunteering to go through the arch. Honestly, I'm not sure they shoulda' bothered. Like I said, he was already on the fence, his buddies just tipped him over. Keith pried his boots off, handing them and his wallet to one of his friends for safekeeping. I was so intent on watching this that I completely missed the first volunteer to go through, only noticing that something had happened when that volunteer sat back down next to her man and hugged him, looking around at the tent like she had new eyes.

The moment the Ferryman asked for a second volunteer, Keith was up like a shot. Although the Ferryman had spoken for some time with the first volunteer, Keith made it clear that he wanted no preamble, and allowed himself to be led behind a privacy screen with robes draped over it, set up earlier by the clowns. After a reasonable amount of scuffling, Keith emerged from behind the screen, wearing one of the robes and a pair of sandals that had evidently been left behind the screen for volunteers. As Keith walked toward the

archway, one of the clowns walked behind the screen, removed the clothes Keith'd left behind, and tossed them into a bin by the door that the Ferryman had earlier told us would be donated to a local charity.

'Keith,' said the Ferryman, 'you have surrendered your possessions. Are you ready to cross those last few steps into the hereafter?'

'Yes, sir!' Keith responded.

'Then I have brought you as far as I may take you. The final few feet are yours to travel under your own power.' He gently turned Keith around to face the archway, and stepped away, leaving Keith suspended in the spotlight. It was pointed directly into the portal itself, and yet still none of us could see beyond it.

Keith barely hesitated at the edge of the portal, I could see him trying to see further into the archway, searching for his own shadow against... anything.

And finding nothing, finding no reason to still his fears, he nonetheless walked the extra step into the space beyond the portal. And vanished.

The portal yawned, empty and silent for a dozen heartbeats.

And then Keith stepped back out, holding up his arm to shield his eyes against the spotlights. His row of friends hooted and hollered, and the rest of the audience took the opportunity to provide him a round of applause. He sauntered back to his seat, laughing off the experience. but I noticed that after one of his friends returned his boots and wallet, Keith had a brief moment of confusion cross his face, as if he didn't recognize his own possessions.

I counted four more volunteers to take the Ferryman up on his offer of transit. In some cases, the Ferryman went back out into the audience to speak to those he'd spoken to earlier, as the emcee.

He came back to me. I told him that I wasn't interested, and he retreated.

'Ladies, gentlemen, and children of all ages... earlier I said that everything must end. It is now apparent that our time together this evening is drawing to its close. But before we bring down the curtain

on tonight's show, there are rules to be followed, traditions to abide. Messrs Berry and Straw will be at the fair for two more evenings, so if you find yourself lying awake later tonight, reconsidering your reluctance to pass through the portal, you'll have opportunities in the future.

'Before we conclude this evening, though, I must ask you three times: are you ready to cross over?' The Ferryman swept his gaze across the audience, locking eyes with as many as he could.

'I ask a second time: are you ready to cross over?' The audience remained silent, so the Ferryman turned his back to us, seeming to ask his final question to the portal itself.

'I ask for the final time this evening: are you ready to cross over?'

A response came from the entrance. 'I think it might be time, yes. Sorry about the short notice – I'm not too late, am I?' Strolling up the central aisle came a figure wearing a high-collared black robe.

The Ferryman turned with relish, but the moment he saw Doc approaching the stage, his eyes widened in barely-suppressed panic.

'You. I didn't... I didn't invite you. You weren't welcomed,' the Ferryman stammered.

'I'm a child of all ages, aren't I? Can we talk?'

I'm kinda in the middle of something, if you hadn't noticed, the Ferryman's voice sounded in my head. Then I coulda' sworn I heard Doc's voice shortly after, but the only words I could make out were, *Careful, slippage*.

The Ferryman, who I swear I saw go pale through all the greasepaint, raised a hand in a signal to the clowns. They sprang into life from their points around the tent, sometimes playing their invisible instruments to favour us with a bit more jazz, but also performing silent tumbling and slapstick humour routines.

And I heard this echo-y voice from everywhere say BE ENTERTAINED. I could tell that the entire crowd heard it, but I also know that no one else heard it like I did. And we was all entertained. I don't know how long it would have lasted, but they was undeniably some damned entertaining clowns.

But through it all, I remember hearing two other voices, very faintly: Doc's and the Ferryman's.

It was like being able to only hear the occasional word or phrase against the crash of the tide. Sometimes I remember it one way, and sometimes another. I remember the Ferryman pleading, begging, saying, *But they'll kill you!* and Doc correcting him: *They'll try.*

I felt the Ferryman surrender in despair an instant before his performance persona snapped back up and the clowns smoothly transitioned their acts to reintroduce him. The last BE ENTERTAINED echo had reverberated into nothingness.

'Hello, friends!' the Ferryman began. 'We have our final pilgrim tonight. My good friend Doc! Hello Doc!'

And Doc said, 'Hello, sir!' while stepping behind the privacy frame. I looked down at the bag at my feet, discovering it somehow now contained a walking stick, and the clothes and shoes I'd seen Doc wearing earlier. And I'd looked through the bag and taken what I wanted out earlier. So I took the bag down to the front of the stage, saying this was Doc's. Ferryman accepted, barely noticed.

Behind the privacy screen Doc had already changed out of the black robe and into one of the cheap ones provided, with accompanying sandals. 'Mmm, surprisingly comfortable. Thank you, Jed.' Musta' noticed the bag I'd left for the Ferryman. Whatever the case, that's the last thing Doc said to me out loud. But at the same time, I heard *You have allies you haven't even met yet.*

Doc went over to the portal and hesitated at the threshold. The Ferryman indicated Doc should wait, and carrying Doc's cast-off black robe, followed slowly. Upon reaching Doc, he held out a hand for one final earthly possession.

I could not tell you how the beard came off. One moment it was on Doc's face, then the next, it was in their hand.

Doc gave the beard to the Ferryman, made sure he was satisfied, turned to me and winked. Doc stepped toward the darkness, and the darkness stepped toward Doc. Don't ask me to quantify it, the shadows just reached out as Doc walked into darkness.

I could not tell you how many heartbeats we waited. Then we

started to hear the creaking. The archway was sagging.

It was not as free-standing as it had earlier appeared. The flimsy façade had been leaning against some support that had been removed, and it quickly collapsed to the ground, pulling the curtains around it down as well, and revealing a big open space behind.

* * *

Wolf's club would get the exact measurements later, but it was clear that space had been left in the tent's floor plan for a small room or something similar, open to the edge of the stage via the fake archway.

Wolf's club was also useful in the boxing up and shipping away of the clowns. As far as anyone could tell, they became completely inert just after Doc's close shave. Wolf would later say that wherever his club went, it was best practice to keep on good terms with local undertakers and others who did trade in large crates. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' *It sounds creepier than it actually is,* Wolf allowed.

Oliver asked us to call him 'Cuzco' from that point on, and he eventually told us that the coast was clear for us to leave or stay. Cuzco was clearly hoping we'd stick around, hinting that the club was planning a party for once everything got sorted out. But Alex had a deadline, and I wanted to be on my way. Wolf saw us out while Shades was putting some neatly folded teddy bear shells into the sidecar next to him. Last I seen of Wolf, he was hugging Alex.

'Ms Collins?'

'Yes, Wolf?'

'Mom and baby girl both doing great. 6 pounds 9 ounces. Emily Patricia.'

Alex gave another of her grins. 'Patricia, huh?'

I actually saw Wolf blush.

* * *

I was really surprised by how much money was in the pot for the Cow Chip Poker raffle. Once I'd unfolded the cash Doc gave me at the beer garden, I discovered the raffle ticket in there too, and it was a winner. I won't say how much I got, but it was enough to get me to Frisco and set myself up there. Frisco was where I found my people, and I wouldn't trade this life for anything. But...

I'm going back. I keep thinking about how lucky I was to get out when I did, and I can only imagine how many other kids haven't been so lucky. For all I know, Marty's runnin' that whole town by now, but I've learned a lot in my decades away, and I'm gonna do what I can to make sure no other kid has to make the choice that I did.

Alex's story eventually got published, but it was more of a curiosity piece than anything, what with that being the last performance of 'The Portal of Transformation!' Alex'd later claim that as a news story, 'Look What Happened' is intrinsically less interesting than 'Look What's Happening'.

We were talking about that night recently, and she asked me if I had ever had any temptation to walk through the portal for a new life. And when I thought about it, I kind of realized that by the time I entered that tent, my new life was already underway. If there was a point that I left my old life behind, it was probably while I was sitting on that bus outside of Fulton.

Nobody ever did find out what happened to the Ferryman (or at least, nobody ever told me). I didn't see where he went – last memory I have was him staring at the empty space beyond the collapsed archway, tears trickling down his perfect greasepaint skull, clutching the robe in one hand and beard in the other, sorrow curdling into bitterness. I hope he had the brains, the heart, and the guts to find a new life like some of them audience members did. I still feel bad for him, left behind like that.

That*, on the other hand, was less than helpful, the Doctor thought ruefully as his past continued to be demolished. Peculiar though it was, this fairground-ride adventure had little to do with the rarefied politics of the Time Lords. It was as if the person he'd once been was keeping secrets still, preventing him – perhaps in order to prevent Morbius – from seeing certain things. As if there were matters this incarnation, so long gone, still preferred to keep private.*

There was no time to consider that, though. The ambiguous face, its sphinx-like smile concealed by that negotiable beard, was gone, and now the screen showed a man whose smile was warm and open, and whose full beard was undeniably real, for all it was so much darker than the blond curls on his head. He wore a pilgrim hat and high-collared herringbone coat, in shades of purple and maroon, and had the assured air of a statesman or a diplomat.

With the memory of being this man, though, there came a sense of pain and loss so acute that the Doctor could hardly bear it. Something horrific had happened to him, and to those he loved. Something that even now he shied away from remembering, even as Morbius rummaged triumphantly through the memories and tossed them aside.

Had the tyrant been responsible? Had he been the one who'd…?

The Doctor peered tentatively into one of the less hostile shallows of this forgotten life for answers, the echo of an unheard cry of grief and rage resounding through his mind.

HOPE SPRINGS
by Chris Wing

'So, why *is* there no echo?'

Carol Williams stood next to the Doctor at the console of the TARDIS, but her gaze was scanning the rest of the room, after suddenly realising that there was indeed no echo. The inside of the TARDIS console room was expansive, a strangely comfortable mix of future technology and old church architecture. 'Room' was probably not the best word it, perhaps 'sanctuary'? It wasn't any wonder that she kept referring to the console as 'the altar'.

The Doctor, as he fussed around the controls, absent-mindedly looked up at her. 'Echo?'

'Yeah,' Carol replied, 'All this stone and mile-high rafters, there should be an echo. Shouldn't there?'

The Doctor mused, gave the slightest amused 'Hmph', as though he'd never even thought of it. 'Ahh!' He called. Nothing. 'Ahh*HH*!' Carol smirked as he looked at her with an amused curve to his mouth. 'So there isn't.'

It was good to see him smile, Carol reflected. She had been on a more than a few adventures with him now and his demeanour had gradually begun to warm. When she had slipped aboard his Ship, she had been enamoured with his manner; he was spirited and determined, but there was something in his eyes that caused her to wonder if something had happened to him, to make him look so… melancholic. Withdrawn, even. Yet, even when he discovered her stowing away, his disgruntled tone gave way to something more like an opportunity. She wasn't sure how to describe it. Like, taking her onboard was an experiment for him, more than an opportunity for her to see the world. *The universe*, she corrected herself.

He had told her, almost in passing, how he had lost his family some time before, but had not gone into detail and Carol, whilst interested in learning more, did not want to push him on a subject that was evidently still quite raw.

With each visit, the Doctor had, very slowly, started to come out of his shell. As if he was determined to utilise her presence as an opportunity to observe the universe anew. Carol hoped that the

ordeals that had overcome him previously weren't going to haunt him forever, because this extended trip of hers certainly wasn't going to last as long. She felt like their time, whilst not a crutch, or a distraction, needed to stand as its own thing.

'Where to next?' she asked chirpily, shaking away the momentary reverie.

'That depends on what you'd like to do, Carol.' He replied. 'Somewhere you've never been, or somewhere you've never even considered?'

She pondered for a moment. 'Well, how about somewhere a little more serene this time? Valdox looked lovely, but there was a little too much opportunity for certain doom.'

'There was, wasn't there?' The Doctor agreed. 'Although that's par for the course in my line of work. But there has surely got to be room for *serene*.'

'Perhaps a nice beach somewhere. If only for a few hours. Take in the sea air. Maybe a quick sangria or two.'

'I have no idea what a sangria is, but I assume it's an Earth thing.'

'It's a cocktail from Spain. I've never been to Spain.'

The Doctor harassed a few controls, pushed a lever and stood back as the time rotor began to heave. 'Spain it is.'

* * *

They ended up at Praia das Furnas beach in Portugal, circa 1603, which suited them both as it was largely unvisited, and Carol could try out some of the pieces that she had found in the TARDIS wardrobe.

The TARDIS morphed into a reasonably sized rocky outcrop and Carol exited in a modest nineteenth-century sunbather outfit, with a large beach towel and folded parasol.

After observing the mountainous terrain in the distance, and listening for locals, she felt she could relax. If only for a bit. That was allowed, she felt. She laid out the towel, plunged the parasol into the sand and got herself comfortable.

She was beginning to enjoy this adventuring. So different from her home time and place, with her whole future in front of her. Sure, she wanted to settle down and have kids, but she also dreamt of

stepping out of the humdrum, if only for a short while. *Something to tell the grandchildren!* she thought. Although learning a language or two and becoming an interpreter, perhaps living abroad like her sister, was what she imagined – not alien wars on distant planets, and being chased by ravenous creatures on distant time adrift moons. She didn't really consider her mortality in regard to travelling with the Doctor, not much anyway, but she did wonder how many adventures she had in her before she asked to go home. What if she caught the bug, she wondered, and *never* wanted to go home?

It was certainly something to ponder, but, Carol mused, as long as they could take little short trips like this and just… *exist* for a short while, the *living* could be whatever she wanted it to be for the rest of the time.

She then thought of the Doctor and the idea of encouraging him to come out of the Ship. Maybe with his fancy striped pantaloons, or whatever they were, rolled up. This newer ensemble suited him a lot more than that dark and drab outfit he had been wearing beforehand; maybe it was a reflection of his mood, she wandered.

She was about to rise, when she heard him trudge up through the sand, subsequently becoming a silhouette in front of the midday sun.

'I'm sorry, Carol,' he began, his voice sombre. 'I have to leave you.'

* * *

She marched after him, back into the TARDIS. '*Leave me?*' she said. 'We've only just got here! And, anyway, you can't just leave me hundreds of years in the past!'

'No, of course, you're absolutely right,' The Doctor concurred. 'I don't know what I was thinking. I've received an urgent message, you see.'

'An urgent message? From who?'

'Well, it's not so easy to know, I'm afraid.' The Doctor began, his darker tone briefly distracted. 'There's only a few folk who should know about how to contact me.' He looked towards Carol, a perturbed fold across his brow. 'So, it could be a trap.'

'Then, just don't go… ?' Carol suggested.

The Doctor paced at this thought. 'I can't just *not* go.' He said.

‘Can I? Whoever sent the message wouldn’t have done so without feeling there was no other option. I’m kind of in hiding, you see.’

‘In hiding? What did you do?’

‘It’s not what *I* did.’ He muttered almost under his breath. ‘The problem is that I couldn’t be *completely* incommunicado, but I also needed *time*. To work out who I am. Who I was becoming. To work out what makes sense now. I left a good friend to a mission of her own, you see, so I could, I don’t know, prepare. *Heal*, I suppose.’

By this point the Doctor had been pacing, the space of the console room allowing for his full strides as he fretted.

It was Carol who stopped his pacing, putting a firm hand on his shoulder. ‘I’m not making sense of what you’re saying, but what *does* make sense to me is that you need to respond to the message.’ Her tone was empathetic and calming. ‘I get why you’ve kept me on board, Doctor, and I’m on board with whatever is coming next. I’m invested.’

The Doctor’s shoulders sagged, almost imperceptibly, with a short sigh. He straightened, straightened his waistcoat, and reset his hat. ‘Yes, you’re right.’ He said, his conviction returning. ‘If you are sure you want to join me? This could get… personal.’

* * *

They landed in a marshland, with a mild foggy atmosphere and no sign of life. No *visible* signs of life, Carol corrected herself, as she squelched into the marshy brush, wellington boots deployed. The Doctor stepped out behind her.

‘I imagine we’re going that way.’ She grimaced, finding the aroma of the marshy horizon to be a little more ripe than she preferred. She pointed at the nearest hut, a primitive thatched affair seemingly held aloft by tall wooden legs, of which there were many dotted around as far as could be seen.

Something sounding like a birdcall emitted from behind them. Carol noted how the marsh in that direction disappeared into swampland covered with tall reeds, too tall for her to see past, and too thick to see through.

‘Let’s try at the first one.’ The Doctor agreed. ‘And hope we hit lucky first time.’

Luck being the word, Carol mused to herself, noting how the fog was beginning to mist up her Nana Mouskouri style glasses.

They trudged along in silence for a while, Carol observing the intent look on Doctor's face as they approached the hut, but as they reached their destination, he caught her gaze and gave her a weak smile. At least he was making an effort for her, she thought, but that almost made it worse.

There was a ladder built into the lower structure of the hut, made of the same bamboo-like reed things that made up the building's legs, with vine holding it all together. Carol allowed the Doctor to take to them first, as she gazed upon the structure.

Seemingly circular, and made entirely of the bamboo (or whatever the material was – there was enough of it around, that was for sure); the hut was a lot bigger than she initially thought; the thatching wasn't made of straw, but some kind of material that looked fibrous, like the vines, but fuller, wider, almost like rope. She wondered where this material had come from – perhaps made from the reeds as well. She climbed the ladder to the platform that surrounded the main structure and followed the Doctor as they gingerly began to walk around.

They came up to a makeshift door and, pausing for a moment, the Doctor looked Carol's way, gave her a 'Here goes nothing' shrug and stepped inside.

* * *

The click and charging whine of a staser sounded as the muzzle pressed against the Doctor's temple and both Doctor and companion froze, but, even before the muzzle could warm with energy, the safety clicked once more and the Doctor turned to see his would-be assailant.

'Doctor!' The short burly man within smiled, almost haphazardly slinging the weapon to one side. 'At last!'

'Tallis?' The Doctor said. 'Goodness me, I didn't recognise you with, with… this!'

He gestured at Tallis' beard, and the man splayed his arms in display, to show his look. 'A bit greyer, yes, but slimmer too, eh?'

'Absolutely, indeed.' The Doctor smiled, 'A complete disguise; not to mention the grime and the smell!'

'Feh,' Tallis dismissed the affectionate slight. 'Comes with the territory, I'm afraid. The prices we pay, eh? Refreshment?'

As he turned to a kitchen side with what appeared to hold

numerous containers and beakers across it, Carol looked around her. The inner room was almost as big as the outer wall, but with a section at the far end that was walled off with a few doors, presumably sleeping quarters. The place looked like it was in need of a full tidy. Paperwork everywhere, a selection of weapons scattered around. The kitchen area (such as it was) was the cleanest place, for which she supposed she was grateful.

'Yes, indeed,' the Doctor replied, his tone taking a sombre turn.

Tallis whirled from what appeared to be a drinks machine, his face aghast. 'Ah, um, that is, I meant to say – '

'No need, Tallis,' The Doctor waved a conciliatory hand. 'We've all had our trials.'

Turning back to the kitchen counter, Tallis began preparing drinks. 'Apologies for the method of communication. It was better to send the beacon than anything more noteworthy –'

'You never know who's listening.'

'That's correct.' Tallis continued. 'Well, I am in receipt of some news that I felt you should have. I dallied at first, uncertain as to whether to pass on the information, but ultimately believed you would prefer to know.'

'Well, don't leave me in suspense, man, I – 'The Doctor paused and turned to Carol. 'I'm so sorry, Carol. This is Tallis, a good friend of mine. He, ah, worked for me back on our home planet.'

'I worked in the citadel and managed the administrations of the Supreme Council, as well as the Doctor's affairs in office,' Tallis interjected. 'Although the Doctor was particularly kind to me. Colour in a field of grey, that's for sure.'

'Well, I wouldn't put it quite like – '

'Just like his father before him, I'd say.' Tallis continued unabashed. 'He would regale the staff with tales of his father's adventures.' He handed Carol a plastic cup with something that looked reasonably water-like. 'And sometimes, some of his own, when he would sneak down to the offices and –'

'You've heard from my father?' The Doctor asked animatedly. 'Is this what you called for?'

'Oh no, no, not from your father,' Tallis said, 'I've received other news, from people I trust, Doctor. We weren't expecting anything like this, so had to dig deeper into its veracity. And it checks out.'

Tallis handed the Doctor a glass and crossed the room to a small

open seating area, where Carol had since seated herself, and picked up a pile of papers. The Doctor put the glass down and followed Tallis, who subsequently passed him the papers.

'Here's the trail. It's short, but conclusive.'

The Doctor's eyes widened as he flicked through them. Carol sat forward in her chair, trying to keep up with what was happening.

The Doctor held the papers like his life depended on it. 'Other preserve us, it's…'

Tallis interjected, nodding. 'Some of them are still alive.'

* * *

Carol screamed.

The atmosphere in the humid pod in which she had been roughly placed seeped into her lungs, making her head swim, as her limbs sunk into the body of the firm gelatinous walls and floor, holding her fast.

'Doctor!' She managed to cry out. Where was he?

He said he would find her, find some way to stop the Chalavians from taking her, but here she was, a sacrificial lamb to their god.

The sealed door to this seemingly living chamber was hard to see through now, as the very air around her misted up and… whispered to her. Warm, calm, soothing tones, yet keeping her on the precipice of mild panic. It was telling her that everything was okay, and it was a wonderous thing to receive the divine.

She couldn't tell if the viscous grey tendrils touching her temples were figments of her fogging mind, or were actually leeching their way out from the gloopy walls, but the voices were becoming clearer. Like they were all around her, but now also gradually coming from inside *her mind.*

They told her that their god was almost with her, that it was so wonderful an honour – the greatest of honours – to be one with god.

Her vision swooned, and the panic was like a shot in the arm. 'You're not a god, you're not *a god!' she cried, breaths of warm atmosphere making her vision sway. 'You're just some slimy angry monster! I'm NOT swapping minds with that! I'm not!'*

But, the swooning and drowsiness was becoming too much; the voices were reaching a jubilantly euphoric crescendo; the pressure on her mind was overwhelming, like something trying to push fingers through a skein of resistance.

She started to believe that she could hear her weakened voice become

part of the throng. 'Doctor…' Carol trailed.

A pair of grasping human hands squelched dramatically through the membranous hatchway before grabbing Carol firmly by the shoulders –

* * *

Carol hunkered down besides the Doctor in what seemed to be a clearing that opened up towards the edge of a humungous ancient crater. Whatever had impacted this land long ago, it had been long enough ago to allow for nature to reclaim it. She could just about see the horizon beyond what was left of the wake.

The Doctor was already crouched next to a large tree that hung perilously over the sheerest ledge, like a cliffside, and Carol had joined him, looking out across.

'You're going to have to tell me something soon, Doctor.' She urged him, trying to balance impatience with empathy.

The Doctor, turned to her with a look that suggested that he had forgotten she had been there, and was suddenly pleased to see her. 'Yes, of course,' he replied, mentally swatting away his single-mindedness. 'I'm sorry, Carol. Yes, of course. You and I have come a long way. And you deserve an explanation.'

He ushered Carol from the edge of the crater cliff, and, once a little more under cover, they crouched together, almost conspiratorially.

'Tallis looked after my needs in my old life back home. He became a family friend, even came to my eldest son's wedding. You remember how I told you that I had lost my family? Well, this isn't really very easy for me to broach, I'm afraid.' He paused, as though mentally gearing himself up. 'I believed them all dead, killed at the hands of a petty regime. So, so ridiculous. But, I – *we* – neglected to observe their fervour the strength of their desire for change. Change for the worse, I feel.' He paused for a moment. Carol could tell it was hard for him to open up, that he was vocalising for his benefit as much as it was an explanation for her. Had he ever spoken about this to anyone before?

'He was the one who warned me of the insurrection, that I should return immediately. It was also him who subsequently tried to warn me to keep away, things had become so impossibly dangerous. I was – I was too late. I couldn't even enter our house. My wife, my

cousins, my chil–'

Carol placed a supporting hand on the Doctor's arm, as he faltered. 'And Tallis has now had word that some of your family escaped?'

The Doctor nodded. She'd never seen him face such emotion before. Always an adventure here, a death-defying escape there. Maybe it ran in the family, if his father was an explorer too. Always avoiding the confines of real life. Which, it seemed, always caught up with you, Carol believed.

'And they are here?'

'Somewhere.' The Doctor said, his resolve firming once more. 'I detected some artron energy on arrival, but in trace amounts. The amount that would be sufficiently found in individual time-travellers, but not so much as time-travelling technology or vehicles.'

'So, we're thinking that, if it *was* a trap, you'd have detected more of that energy?'

'That is indeed what we are thinking, yes.' The Doctor replied. 'Even so, I don't want to just waltz in and discover it *is* a trap after all. I want to wait. And observe.'

'Okay, said Carol, ready for the upcoming vigil. 'So we wait.'

* * *

'Okay, okay, I'm sure we can come to some mutually beneficial agreement here!'

The Doctor was most certainly not in a position to bargain. He was unable to move, what with two Quadi soldiers holding him fast by each arm, and a third larger burlier Quadi looming before them, branching his axe.

Just out of sight, hidden in a copse of trees, Carol, Empress Consort Constantia and her escort watched on helplessly.

She and the Doctor had literally stumbled on the Quadi raiding party quite by accident, after the Doctor had promised Carol the experience of true Roman baths – a true Roman bloodbath was not really what she was hoping for.

They had arrived almost in the midst of battle – not that you could call this one-sided assault a battle. Carol had learnt, later on, that Constantia was betrothed to wed Roman Emperor Gratian, and the convoy was transporting her to him, but was ambushed near the city of Sirmium,

by this horde of raiders.

And now with the rest of Constantia's modest convoy either escaped or killed, the Quadi were intent on finding the girls. But not before putting an end to the Doctor.

'Your friend's life is forfeit!' Constantia whispered, her tone older than her twelve years. 'He should not have helped us from the clutches of those animals!'

'Not if I can help it.' Carol muttered, her heart pounding in her ears. But she found that she wasn't scared, like she should have been. She was angry. Her brother David, almost a full decade older than her, had always said she was a scrappy skinny thing, with no sense of her own safety when riled. He used to tease her mercilessly, just because she was the littlest, she thought.

The Doctor and his oppressors were out in the open, not too far away, but far enough for her not to be able to creep up. She'd be seen almost instantly if she just crept out of the cover of trees.

And that's when she spotted it. About halfway between their cover of trees, and the scene of imminent death, there lay a gnarled wooden club. Next to a prone Quadi raider, it looked huge and probably unwieldy, but Carol didn't even stop to think about it being too heavy for her.

Exploding from the trees in a sprint, Carol found herself screaming in rage, the three Quadi oppressors looking her way with looks of utter shock – the same exact look that now adorned the Doctor's face.

Carol didn't even slow as she drew back the club, raising it into a full swing –

* * *

'Is two days long *enough*?'

The Doctor had spent the last 40 hours or so, scanning, observing. Waiting.

Carol didn't know how he managed to be so single-minded and not just rush in, but she knew that he couldn't risk this entire thing being a trap.

So, she waited with him. She helped him retrieve equipment from the TARDIS. They got climbing equipment and climbed down the cliffside and set up a camp. They had then carefully and quietly explored the basin of the crater, observing the undergrowth that had grown over the millennia.

The camp, set up within the undergrowth where they had first set foot after they had rappelled down the crater floor, was modest and well concealed. Their tent was spacious and had something the Doctor called an experimental perception filter which apparently helped onlookers not to notice it. Honestly though, Carol thought, it was camouflaged so well, even she missed where it was once or twice, after a day of creeping around the undergrowth.

The Doctor's equipment had been consistently observing this 'energy', something he wanted to observe fluctuating if at all, and throughout, it did not. The signs were good.

After the first day, he started concentrating more closely on the opposite site of the crater. They ended up observing that opposite cliffside from every angle that she could determine. It was just a sheer as the side they were at the foot of, descending off to what she assumed was east, as the wake dissipated off into the distance. There were holes dotted along the face of the cliff, seemingly natural.

'There,' The Doctor had told her. 'The artron energy is emanating somewhere along that ridge, below those holes.'

'And nothing is changed? Er, fluctuating?'

'Hasn't done for two days now.'

'Which is good?' Carol was sat on a small camping chair, eating out of a tin of beans.

The Doctor, who had been laying on this stomach, engrossed in a small read-out screen, finally tore himself away, rising to his haunches and faced his friend with a quietly hopeful smile. 'I believe so, yes.'

* * *

Soon after, the Doctor decided that it was time to move and, with their vigil over, Carol and the Doctor packed away their equipment, eventually climbing the cliff side a final time and returning to the TARDIS.

Carol found herself feeling equal parts excited and apprehensive.

'Should we go and get Tallis for help? Or maybe collect your friend? The one who was on the campaign with you?' She asked, over the mild warm hum of the console room.

'Oh no, I shouldn't think so. I dropped Dattany off to tend to a solo mission, whilst I… dealt with my troubles. She doesn't need

distracting. Not with this.' The Doctor said. 'Besides, she and I have a specific rendezvous point scheduled. And I'm the one with a TARDIS.' He gave her a conspiratorial smile as he readied his longcoat and short cape.

'Okay, so what's the plan?'

'See the edge of that side of the crater over that side, near the catacomb openings? If I can drop down onto that pathway that should take me right up to them.'

'Unless it's a tiny ledge.' Carol proffered.

The Doctor mused for a moment. 'From what I can tell from this angle, the pathway's more than wide enough to drive a car along. So a little wider than a ledge.' Carol grinned at him, as he quickly realised that she was teasing him a little. He continued. 'The readings seem to suggest a degree of hollowing within so, plenty to explore, I suspect.'

He subsequently retied his outrageous cravat, and Carol found herself much preferring this more flamboyant outfit that the sombre black and greyscale one he wore when they met. The drab charcoals had given way to this suit of deep reds and almost purples, and she suspected this was an outfit he wore before his terrible experience. She hoped that this venture into the catacombs would only help further still.

'Gotcha. Just give me a few minutes to get changed and we'll – '

'Just me, Carol.' The Doctor said, his softer tone, taking on a firm, almost paternal edge. 'Sorry. I need to do this alone. Perhaps you could get a few rooms prepared? I don't know if we'll be entertaining or not, but it's best to be ready than not.'

Carol couldn't hide from her face how crestfallen she felt. The Doctor held her by the shoulders cajolingly. 'We don't ultimately know what we'll find in there, and I want you to be safe. I don't want to take any chances. Not this time.'

Carol's shoulders slumped in defeat. 'I suppose.' She muttered, dejected.

'I should only be a few hours.' The continued. 'If there's any sign of trouble, I'll be back sooner.'

Accepting her lot, Carol brightened. 'I hope you find what you're looking for, Doctor.'

Patting her warmly on the arm, the smiled at her once more. 'Me too.'

And with that, after Carol passed him his hat, and he pulled it

firmly over his curls, the Doctor nodded affirmatively at her and set off.

Carol waited for a moment as the TARDIS doors closed behind him and let out a big dejected sigh. She had no idea how many rooms they were going to need, so she supposed she'd better get started, hoping that it wasn't such a huge task.

It could have only been moments after Carol had left the console room that an agitated beeping began emitting from the console.

* * *

The mouth of the catacomb system was large and appeared to branch off some way into the cliff. The Doctor hoped that he could use the natural light as long as he could before resorting to a source of his own, just in case he didn't want his presence noticed.

But as he ventured in, the quietness felt more serene than ominous. In the distance somewhere, he could hear a source of flowing water, which gave off a soothing quality.

The walls of the cave system weren't blatantly smooth, but he could tell they were man-made. Almost homely, even. You could tell when sentient effort was personable or functional; this seemed like it was functional once, then repurposed.

He followed what seemed to be an obvious route – no real sign of beginnings of a maze system, thankfully – until he turned a corner and the passage opened up into a large circular space, almost like a foyer.

Several doors were presented before him and only one was open. And there was a light within. Not without a little trepidation, the Doctor soundlessly approached and peered through.

It looked like a relatively nondescript living quarters. Like a comfortable bunker that people would shelter in. He stepped in, looked about and couldn't find anything that would give him any clues.

Which was when he heard footsteps behind him.

'We've been waiting for you, Doctor.'

He turned at the sound of the smooth self-assured voice, and saw four people standing menacingly before him, blocking his entrance.

'*No*.'

The man who spoke stepped forward, a heavy staser held with both hands, the muzzle pointed directly at the Doctor's chest. 'I'm afraid so. We've been looking for you.'

The Doctor's hearts fell through his chest, a deep pang in his stomach. 'Is that you, Gatramaladarian? You've changed again.'

'Yes, Doctor, no thanks to you. But I won't take it personally. We've worked hard to get you here.' He smiled. 'And it's Gatra, thank you very much.'

All of a sudden, the very atmosphere felt too heavy to hold him. The Doctor slumped, sliding ungraciously to his knees, resting subsequently in a seated pose, one knee up, held close. 'You got to Tallis. You *must* have been working hard.'

'Very hard indeed.' Gatra concurred smoothly. 'I would say you are probably the most wanted man in the universe. You were bound to show yourself sooner or later. And you were worth the wait.'

'But like *this*?' The Doctor, suddenly enraged, jumped to his feet. 'You *dared* to stoop so low?'

The two larger men stiffened, ready to defend their leader. The third only flinched a little, standing a little further back from Gatra.

'And who is this?' The Doctor bellowed. 'Cowering here. Admin? He looks like one of Morbius' lot?'

The slight man straightened, and opened his mouth, ready to issue a rebuttal, but Gatra interjected. 'We're onboarding a number of emerging voices, Doctor. This man is a politician of some ambition, as are we all. Yourself included.' The Doctor wiped the greasy politician's growing smirk from his face with a hearty roll of his eyes.

'*Ambition*? What are you going on about, Gatra? Just do what you came to do and execute me.' The Doctor scowled.

Gatra was unmoved. It was as if he had practised this moment. He probably had, the Doctor thought.

'Is that what you think this is about?' Gatra uttered a dramatic laugh. It felt contrived. 'No, Doctor, we want to renew you. Bring you back into the fold, as to speak.'

'*Never.'* The Doctor spat. 'After everything our people have allowed? After everything you have done, you think that I would willingly return to the chambers – '

'Not willingly, no,' The reedy politician stepped in. 'We're going to wipe your mind, edit your memories. Have you join us.'

'What is this?' The Doctor was absolutely baffled, if not enraged.

‘The High Council allows this?’

‘Not strictly the High Council, no; you shouldn’t ever presume that the High Council was ever unaware of the turn of events.’ Gatra said, glaring at the younger man, who seemed not to notice at all. ‘But it would never do for them to been seen to be involved, would you agree? Your beloved Supreme Council has been retired, however, like the tired old clueless sentry it ever was.’ Gatra even had the gall to pace now. ‘But, yes, that is our intent. We recognise your resourcefulness and seek to utilise it.

‘Never.’ The Doctor stood firm. ‘I knew you were the lowest of the low, Gatra, but this…’

‘I serve for the glory of our people.’

‘So you always say. ‘ Without warning, the Doctor lunged at Gatra, taking him totally by surprise, and sending the heavy staser from his grasp. Gatra fell back, the politician diving out of reach. This gave the two lumbering guards the space to grab the Doctor and heavily drag him away from his charge.

Gatra was visibly shaken – he had never seen this behaviour in someone as revered and lofty as the Doctor. ‘You want to kill me, Doctor?’ He barked, a twinge of anger seeping from his voice. ‘Do you think it was me who gave the order?’

‘Oh, I won’t kill you, Gatra, you’ll fall upon your own sword soon enough. Long before I ever have the chance.’ The Doctor ceased struggling now. He knew it was impossible to pull free.

Gatra stared at him, his composure under threat of dissolving. He sighed audibly, and straightened his tunic, his resolve now returned. His face implacable.

The Doctor observed this steel, felt the iron grip of his captors, and something turned in him. His resolve finally ebbed, and he sagged, defeated.

‘Don’t worry, Doctor,’ Gatra concluded. ‘We are going to take your pain away and you will never need worry about heartbreak ever again.’

‘My grandchild.’

Gatra was statuesque. ‘Take him away.’

* * *

‘Doctor, if you push the TARDIS any harder, she’ll break.’ Dattany’s voice

was a mixture of concern and force. She had not seen him like this before. And she had seen him angry before now. This was altogether something else. Something worse.

He ignored her, and opened up the engines even more. Further than was safe. A distant bell chimed ominously.

'Doctor!'

'He said they were in danger, Dattany! We need to get to them before it's too late!'

They had received Tallis's urgent comms only once they had returned to the TARDIS. They hadn't even been on a campaign. Just some casual visit somewhere nice. A rest. A recuperation before prepping for the next one. Who knows how long that message had been waiting.

He knew tensions were rising back home, but he hadn't expected this. Even in his lofty position. If only he just hadn't been so single-minded in this life, maybe he should listened to his –

'Doctor, if you blow the engines, we won't be going anywhere.' Dattany urged him. She understood what was at stake. She had been at the Doctor's son's wedding, met his wife, hadn't seen the resemblance. But it must have been noteworthy as people assumed that she was one of the cousins. So, Dattany understood, but if they faltered here, all would be lost.

The Doctor locked eyes with her for a moment. A moment that held and felt like an age. What do I do if…? *his eyes asked her.*

He broke eye contact and slowed the engines. The bell stopped, and the weird temporal pressure behind Dattany's eyes subsided. An alert then issued from the console, making her jump.

It was a communiqué. The Doctor punched a button, connecting to the other end.

It was Tallis. He sounded urgent, and hurt. 'Doctor. Doctor, can you hear me?' The sound quality was affected too, sounding muffled and crackly.

'Where are you, Tallis?' the Doctor called. 'What is happening?'

There was a pause. Then, in a bleak, resolved tone. 'Don't come back, Doctor. Don't come back.'

The graveness in Tallis' voice punched through Dattany's soul. She absolutely dreaded the Doctor looking her way. He did not.

'They're waiting for you, Doctor. The citadel is overrun. They have a warrant for your arrest, and they've… a militia has gone up to the house. Just don't come back, Doctor.'

The TARDIS lurched suddenly, and the console's central column

dropped like an emergency stop.

'Too late.' The Doctor said grimly. 'I'm already here.'

* * *

The cell, such as it was, was more of a spacious store cupboard, except completely emptied and secured.

The Doctor had not even tried to observe his surroundings for a means of escape.

He felt such a fool. How could he have been so naïve? Was he that easily turned by the promise of what was now evidently absurd? How could he have trusted Tallis's message?

The Doctor felt utterly defeated. Truly. He escaped with his life from the fateful turn of events that should have been his final end. He had fought against his homeworld, he had fought against fate and he had fought against himself. He made his TARDIS untraceable and just… carried on. He hid his grief and despair and went on more adventures. Sometimes mindless and rash ones, some where he made a despot or tyrant pay more severely than they perhaps deserved. He choked his grief down, made the wrongdoers pay and went off on another adventure.

It took an unwelcome travelling companion to slowly wear away that carapace that he had grown around himself, to the point that he could face who was now was – *what* he now was – a traveller who righted wrongs simply because it was right. He wanted to know he could do good rather than just exact justice. He knew that this aspect was still a part of him, more than ever, and always would be in this life, but, just for a while, he didn't want to just be the hunter of monsters, he wanted to be the adventurer too.

But such adventuring always had a tether, throughout most of his incarnations. Someone whose very existence always called him back home, but also allowed him his space and time *(just like his father)* to endeavour to better the universe.

That tether was now severed, and the Doctor had had to learn a *new* normal. And now, he mused bleakly as he sat in the makeshift holding cell, he wasn't allowed even that.

Maybe that nameless politician was right, he mused bleakly. Maybe it was time to go home. Take away the memories, point him in the direction of adversity and set him off. Become the Council's dog of

war.

The Doctor found himself almost giving in to the void, once more. He had been tantalised with the one thing that could draw him out and he had gaily skipped straight into it. He wondered, with a degree of finality, if he should let someone hold his reins instead.

This was when the door clicked chunkily, and creaked open.

The Doctor sat up, composed himself. Was this it? Was it to happen here? Or back home?

It was then, for the briefest of seconds, he wondered what ever would become of Carol.

Carol popped her head round the door.

'Hi!' she beamed ecstatically, entering the room, the Doctor's cane in hand. 'You forgot this, so I thought I'd bring it.'

* * *

And with that, the ziggurat exploded.

Carol and her new friends fell back with the force of the explosion, toppling them as they tried in vain to shield their eyes.

Moments felt like forever, as Carol scrambled to Sophie, then Lee, for safety between them, but it was over sooner than any of them realised.

'Doctor!' Carol cried, as soon as the debris had settled, and the ground had ceased tremoring.

She set off towards the rubble, Lee grabbing her arm. 'There's no way anyone could have survived that!' he called after her, as she pulled free. 'Wait!' He and Sophie raced after her.

Carol climbed, her ascent a lot less careful than she should have been, almost recklessly dislodging pieces of ruined masonry as she tried to reach where the summit had been.

The Doctor had been fastened, almost Christ-like, to the large stone altar, his unique alien physiology supposedly a perfect conduit for the Chot'L'Kai people to siphon the time winds that scored the heavens like gods eternally battling.

They believed that the Doctor's arrival was a sign, an emissary from the gods that they could subsequently use to harness the temporal energies that coursed across their skies.

Which, unfortunately for the Doctor, meant trussing him up to what effectively a stone pylon atop an ancient building, like some kind of supernatural lightning rod.

But, as was now painfully apparent, harnessing such power was not possible and, as the Doctor had tried to warn them, utterly beyond their technological capabilities to achieve. But, of course, the religiously fervent are never ones to take heed, Carol noted, and their efforts became a sacrifice.

She heard her two friends call after her, trying to get her to stop as they struggled to keep up with her, but she didn't pause. She had to see for herself what had become of the Doctor.

And that was when she saw him.

With masonry and slabs of stone haphazardly resting all around, Carol leapt across the dangerous landscape, stopping only as she reached him, as he lay prone, no longer fastened to the altar. Whatever had become of it wasn't clear. It was now part of the ruins.

'Doctor?'

He looked dead.

Finding her footing, and kneeling beside his partially covered body, Carol hefted away a few pieces of debris that covered him, a larger slab concealing his lower half.

She saw his face, bruised and bloodied, but no sign of major impact, that she could tell.

Mind racing, she took off her glasses and held them beneath his nose. The one of the lenses misted up, but only barely.

'Is he dead?' Sophie asked as she and Lee came to a halt beside Carol. 'Oh my God, he's '

'He's alive,' Carol snapped. 'But only barely.'

'We need to get him back to the TARDIS,' Lee said. 'If he has a chance of getting through this at all –'

'I know!' Carol said. 'That slab needs moving. There's no telling if –'

The Doctor groaned, his head moved as he winced weakly.

'Doctor!'

'Carol.' he croaked. 'I think I'm alive… am I? Do I look the same?'

'Don't try to move, Doctor, we're gonna get you out and back home –'

'No no no, not home, can't go…'

'The TARDIS is just there,' Sophie said. 'If we can carry him back, we can get out of here.'

Carol looked around them. Now the remains of the ziggurat had mostly settled, and the temporal storm had dissipated, things were quiet, apart from her pulse pounding in her ears. The chanting from the

Chot'L'Kai had ceased too.

'Lee, we need to move this slab before we do anything,' Carol said, her tone a little less frantic now,

'I think if all three of us try, we can do it,' Lee added. 'And I don't want any of those nutters showing their faces before we can get back.'

And with that, the three young people worked as one to tip the masonry to one side. To the great relief of everyone, it was simply obscuring their friend and had crushed him. His foot was at a funny angle though, Carol noted.

For the next couple of minutes, the three fussed around the Doctor, helping rouse him and even managing to turn him and prop him up.

'Carol,' the Doctor said weakly. 'The TARDIS. I need to get back. I can heal there – the recuperation device.'

Carol knew what he meant. On their second adventure, she had been quite gravely hurt and he had placed in this hospital bed type machine, which had helped stabilise her as it sped up her recuperation. 'Gotcha,' she said, not letting her tone give away the fact that she was worried what would happen if they took too long to make their way back to safety. 'That's what we're going to do.'

After hastily discussing how they were going to manage traversing the ruined landscape, the three very carefully, and very gingerly, set about lifting the Doctor, before descending what was left of the once ominous building.

The Doctor slipped in and out of consciousness as they did so, and Carol was beyond relieved when they managed to get back inside.

With her guidance, the three managed to get the Doctor's prone form back to the TARDIS without a hitch – no slipping or staggering, and no native species trying to stop them.

Inside, once figuring out how to deploy the sickbed, Carol fussed hesitantly around the controls that were at the base of the bed, not really sure what to do next, to get the contraption to start doing whatever magic it did for her a few months back.

The Doctor was conscious, but not very lucid. She tried to ask him how to proceed, but he murmured something intelligible; something about patience, or patients. She knew that she wasn't going to get any sense out of him.

'Is he going to be okay?' Sophie asked, not really sure how to be of any further use.

'Uh, yeah, definitely,' Carol replied, almost absent-mindedly. 'He just

needs time to recuperate.' She looked back at the display of buttons and dials, and just pressed one.

A clear glass cover swiftly hummed over the bed, encapsulating the Doctor and it misted up inside.

Carol looked at the other two, all three clueless, wide-eyed and motionless. She shrugged at them. 'There,' She said, sighing with relief.

The three companions found themselves suddenly unsure what to do next. So they waited.

* * *

They hared up the passageway after quietly closing the door to the Doctor's imprisonment, each knowing the exit route without the guidance of the other.

Carol had crept through an unguarded entrance on her way in, but had paused in alcoves as big, burly security passed now and then. It had been apparent that the Doctor's captors had not arrived here by TARDIS, as she had overheard some of them discussing the ship they had been deposited by and were now planning a rendezvous for being picked up, so there wasn't very much time to find her friend.

Thankfully, they met no-one as they neared the exit.

They slowed at the mouth of the entrance, as daylight began to offer them their freedom, but a figure stepped into view.

'Going somewhere, Doctor?' It was the young nameless politician that had been at Gatra's side previously. Still wearing an unnecessary formal tunic as earlier, he stood motionless, his slicked-back hair the epitome of reservedness.

'Get out of our way, you weaselly creature.' The Doctor warned, his tone steely.

'I'm afraid not.' The reedy man sneered. 'It's quite the coup, getting you onboard. There's no way we're letting you escape now.'

'It will never work," The Doctor chided. 'Like all tin-pot dictators, Morbius' reign will never last. And fawning acolytes like you never gain the favour you dream of enjoying. I've seen it all too many times.'

'Say what you will, Doctor,' The man said, unperturbed. 'This time tomorrow, you won't remember saying any of it. And you shall be in his employ.'

He pointed his weapon at the Doctor and waved it to usher the duo back along the route they had come. ‘This is set to the highest stun setting, Doctor; you are to be incapacitated, not killed. Of course, there’s no telling what it may do a human’s internal organs.’ He spat the word ‘human’ with a degree of disgust. ‘Things are changing back home, Doctor, and we intend to ensure that the changes follow the order of our choosing.’

The Doctor set to reply, but Carol interjected, abruptly. ‘But surely, won’t firing that in this direction cause some kind of cave-in? Even on stun? Like, if you miss? That ceiling above you doesn’t look too stable as it is.’

‘What? No.’ The man was incredulous, ‘What are you gibbering on about?’

‘Oh, I dunno,’ Carol continued. ‘What if it even fell right on top of you in… three…’

‘I have no idea what you – ‘

‘Two…’

‘Honestly, if you think I’m falling for – ‘

‘One!’ Carol clicked her fingers into pistol shapes at him, and Tallis cracked the politician over the head with a large heavy log. He dropped unceremoniously to the floor, unconscious.

‘You!’ The Doctor cried, lurching forward, but Carol held him back.

‘Doctor, wait! It was Tallis who contacted the TARDIS to warn us!’ she said. ‘I received it a while after you had gone.’

‘I’m so sorry, Doctor.’ The deep regret was thick in Tallis’ tone. ‘I was alerted to a weakness in the chain of contact, only a short time after you had both set off, but it was way too late for me to stop you.’

‘Once I got his communication, I helped him locate us, so he could come and help me get you out.’ Carol added.

Heavy stater fired shot past them, and the three flinched in surprise. ‘Time to go!’ the Doctor cried, as if they needed instruction, and the three ran.

* * *

Clearly, the shots fired were quickly considered inappropriate for prospective future agents *not* being killed as they attempted escape, and they soon ceased, although given the haste with which the three

travelled, the Doctor, Carol and Tallis, they were able to reach their TARDISes before any pursuers were even close to locating them.

Before they departed, Tallis broached the subject again. ‘I would never have turned against you, Doctor, please know that.’

‘Of course, Tallis, of course. I understand.’ The Doctor was genuine in his tone. ‘If I wasn’t so quick to pander to my hopes, I would have provided some extra due diligence of my own. It’s the sheer gall of those operatives behind us that’s deserving of my ire.’

‘Nothing seems beyond them, nothing is sacred any more!’ Tallis said, ‘But you must know, there is nothing wrong with hope. Nothing weak about it. I know you, Doctor. As a man of influence and as a friend. Hope is a strength.’

‘Thank you, Tallis.’ The Doctor smiled warmly. He looked across the distance, still expecting silhouettes to become apparent. ‘I think it’s time we went out merry ways.’ The shook hands, and Tallis brought him in for a hug, which Carol felt the Doctor wasn’t quite ready for. Her hug, though, was prepared for, and she hugged Tallis back.

And, with that the three returned the TARDISes that they arrived in and vanished, presumably never to meet again.

* * *

‘He’s right, you know.’ Carol said, as they both stood at the console, as ever, a little while later.

‘Is he?’ The Doctor asked.

‘Yeah. It’s okay to believe they’re still out there.’ She paused for a moment. ‘I don’t think I would have suggested it when we first met, but I think it’s safe to say now.’

The Doctor mulled over the controls for a few moments, and Carol wondered if maybe she had misjudged the moment and this entire ordeal had set him quite far back some ways.

But, after a beat, he looked up at her, with not so much a quizzical look, but one where he was genuinely considering her words.

‘There’s nothing to say they are. There’s nothing to say they aren’t.’ He said finally, with the slightest of shrugs. ‘But whichever way, my focussing on the former and letting it get under my skin is not the way forward, I think. For now, I want to focus on this new

reality I inhabit. I can't avoid it, I suppose.'

'Whatever is now, is always the status quo. For now.' Carol agreed.

'Hm. Yes, indeed.'

He pulled the final lever, and the central column started to rise and fall.

'Let's see what happens next, shall we?'

* * *

'Well, that was another scrape, barely avoided!'

The Doctor and Carol slammed the TARDIS doors shut, their backs against the doors as though to keep their pursuers from getting in.

'Indeed!' exclaimed the Doctor, only a little out of breath. 'Remind me next time *not* to inadvertently promise my extremities away to ancient species in easily gesticulated betrothal rituals!'

'I promise to keep reminding you of that,' Carol laughed, 'Whether you like it or not! Not to mention how it's *not* on my bucket list be become the main meal after the ceremony. Whatever this… this *glaze* is, it better wash out.'

Once their breath had been caught, they moved over to the console, the Doctor tending to the dematerialisation process. 'Also, I really must try and see how to update the language databases. I get too used to the translator being comprehensive.'

'Good idea. That's one situation you really don't want to be repeating.' Carol agreed. 'Or starting an atomic war, or something.'

'That too.' The Doctor smiled, and began dematerialising the TARDIS away and on to another adventure.

A little while later, after Carol had showered and changed, as was no longer as pungent as she had previously been, she returned to the console room, and had draped herself unceremoniously on the ridiculous huge chaise longue that sat near the console area.

After a short while of relative quiet, and Carol was on her feet again, almost pacing, something the Doctor found unlike her, so he approached her. 'What is it, Carol?'

She matched his gaze, but her hesitancy was apparent. He respectfully waited. 'I think it's time.'

He gave her a moment, and when she didn't continue, he said.

‘To part company?’

Another beat. ‘I think so, yeah.’ She was clearly uncertain, but also seemingly resolute. ‘It was never meant to be forever, was it?’ She continued. ‘I have a future back home to get back to. A wedding to start saving for.’

‘Ah yes, that’s right,’ The Doctor smiled warmly, ‘Well, I’m sad to see you go, but I suppose it is a fitting point to draw a line to it.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘For what? We’ve had so many adventures. So much fun, even. You’ve helped *make* it fun. Fun to be escaping the jaws of death on a regular basis.’

They stood for a moment, satisfied that the moment had been broached as well as could have been expected. Rubbing her warmly on the arm, the Doctor returned to the console. ‘Here we go then. Earth. Oxfordshire. Right where we started.’

‘Thank you.’ Carol said. ‘I’ll get my things together.’

By the time she was ready, they had arrived. The Doctor had checked the scanner to confirm they were where they wanted to be, and was satisfied he’d got the exact right date. It wasn’t always guaranteed, but this time, it was.

‘Okay,’ Carol said, almost nervously. ‘All ready.’

‘And we’re here.’ The Doctor said. They stood at the TARDIS doors as they opened, letting the fresh countryside air mingle with the air inside. ‘Here, take this.’ He handed her a small device and explained that it was the same as the one he had shared with Tallis. ‘I don’t have very many of these.’ He said. ‘But I am hoping for an invitation to the wedding.’

Carol took it, a modest grin on her face. ‘I’ll send you one, for sure.’

She turned then, and made her way over the threshold, but then turned back. ‘What will you do now? Find your friend? Continue your campaign together? She’s probably long finished her mission by now.’

The Doctor mulled it over for a moment, making a gesture of umming and ahhing. ‘Perhaps,’ he mused. ‘I might just stop in to see a few old friends beforehand. Save a few more worlds. Maybe make a few new friends along the way. Balance the retribution out a bit.’

‘Okay.’ Carol smiled. ‘See you soon, Doctor.’ She stepped back, backpack of belongings slung heftily over her shoulder, and managed a wave.

The Doctor reciprocated and closed the doors on his friend for the final time.

With a deep sigh, the Doctor walked, once again, as ever, back to the console, and set the dematerialisation sequence.

As the central column moved in accordance with taking flight and leaving time-space for the vortex, the Doctor decided to let the TARDIS choose the next destination.

Which was when the central column stalled, spluttered, and went dark.

'*DOC-TORR!*' boomed the deep female voice throughout the entire chamber of the console room. '*I FIND YOU AT LAST!*'

The Doctor rolled his eyes dramatically, and issued a deliberately vocal sigh. 'Not *you* again…'

* * *

The Doctor cautiously entered the old house, and pulling the door up, quietly took in the hallway. Slightly musty, but at least that was a good sign that no-one had been here for a little while.

The Doctor trod lightly through the darkened hallway, the door to the kitchen wide open and a single blade of light piercing through a slight crack in the kitchen window, almost slicing the hallway in two.

With the stairway to the right, there was an alcove underneath, where post was typically laid, alongside other knickknacks or other bric-a-brac that this or other Doctors would leave or retrieve.

This time, there was something that this Doctor was hoping for.

There was a single envelope lying atop the bureau cabinet table, marked 'Father'. *The handwriting was familiar. Even after all this time.*

The Doctor smiled with irony that whoever left this wouldn't necessarily have known which body *would have received it. It took only a moment to apply a letter opener, kept next to a mottled steel handheld device with a bulbous glass tip that the Doctor didn't recognise, and carefully extract the slip inside.*

The Doctor unfolded it, not without a degree of trepidation – grateful that this incarnation had the urge and capacity to seek a more zen lifestyle than the last, a more studious approach to travel as far as possible. But this moment was certainly one of the more testing experiences in recent memory.

Upon reading the message, the Doctor covered a porcelain-smooth

mouth with – what? Shock? Relief?

A moment's pause, resting against the opposite wall to the slender hallway. Then, after a few more moments of repose, the Doctor stood firm once more and pulled the velvet jacket straight.

The Doctor precisely folded the message, placed it delicately into one of the bureau drawers, closed it and exited through the front door. Perhaps with an ever so slight, almost imperceptible, increase of vigour in each step.

Father,

Apologies for not writing sooner, and with such brevity, but we finally feel it safe enough to tell you that we are here on Earth.

We keep each other company and away from the limelight, and any trouble.

Be assured that we are safe.

Yours always,

C & J

The Doctor's enemy was crowing again. 'Your puny mind is powerless against the strength of Morbius!'

Well, yes, he thought. Try telling me something I don't know.

The sense of the statesman's pain was slipping away now, and for once the loss of that loss felt almost merciful. Not to be that man, or not to remember being him, was actually a relief. That wasn't a feeling the Doctor could afford to indulge.

He welcomed the next face nevertheless, the piebald statesman giving way to a bewigged fop with a long face and a cleft chin. And a ruffled shirt and topcoat. And a hat with a plume. The Doctor wouldn't have been surprised to remember that he'd carried a sword.

Not, evidently, a man who felt embarrassed about his fashion decisions. If he was self-conscious then he was ostentatiously so, a showoff in search of an audience. The Doctor found it hard to imagine forgetting meeting such a person, let alone being him.

He remembered now, though. He'd spend some time in revolutionary Paris. He'd always been fond of Paris, but for this incarnation it had been the perfect backdrop.

Where had he stayed that time, he wondered? He couldn't remember the address, but his mind was telling him the street was important. It must have been the Rue de la... something. That was to say, the Rue de... what?

The Rue...

THE SWAN AND THE FLAME
by Kara Dennison

After cheating death on Liloth 7, the Doctor has parted ways with his companion Rue and begun a new life on Earth. But a familiar face has enlisted his help in a conflict that could change the very fabric of the universe. With a new companion at his side, the Doctor sets out once again – but what is the renegade known as the Citizen truly after?

Depending on how one looked at it, it had been either four or -156 years since the Doctor and Rue had parted ways. The final falling-out between the Order of the Spheres and his handlers had been a bridge too far. Nor were said handlers the only ones fed up with the Order's repeated lack of transparency. The Unity had made their displeasure known, and the resulting conflict called into question the continued survival of the allegedly benevolent scribes. For Rue, it seemed, the fun was over when she was no longer the deadliest thing in the room; her words had said one thing, but her eyes said another entirely. He knew that look: the look of wanting to be as far from all this nonsense as possible.

'But I wear it better,' he muttered, primping what may have been a wig or unfortunate hair as he regarded himself in the floor-length mirror. It was dark in the TARDIS. It had to be. Powering her down was the only way to stay hidden for now. And he was rather enjoying being hidden. Even if it meant being brought to ground on Earth. He'd had about enough of playing errand boy. Look where it had got them.

He turned and gave the console a gentle pat. 'Hope you're having a nicer rest than I am, old girl.' Then he smoothed his face, fixed his posture, and grabbed the letter that would lead him to his next port of call. There was work to be done, after all. He paused by his little desk to grab his chatelaine, topped with a deep blue cameo and holding several little necessities, and hung it from his belt. It was a relatively new piece, and one he was proud of. Perhaps at some point he'd have a chance to test out its more unconventional

functions.

The Doctor slipped out of the TARDIS, ducking carefully under the climbing roses that now wended their way across her exterior. He'd considered pruning them back, but only ever got as far as clearing enough space for an easy entrance and exit. He closed and locked the door behind him, turned on his heel, and executed a gallant bow to the craft.

'Monsieur?' The coachman a few feet away peered at the sight but offered no further comment.

'There is always time for chivalry,' the Doctor said pleasantly, putting his hat back atop his wig and striding to the carriage. 'To the Chateau d'Alarie, if you please. Quick as you like. Quicker, preferably.'

The coachman was silent for the entirety of the journey, just as the Doctor preferred. Paris circa 1792 passed him by through the coach window. Beautiful and ugly, energetic and terrifying. He'd be lying to himself if he claimed not to have chosen his destination very specifically. At first, he'd intended to watch the whole revolution unfold from a safe distance – perhaps take it as a bit of a lesson in action. See how humans dealt with being pushed about for too long, how *they* retaliated when it all became too much. But he'd gotten restless, damn him. Too much action and not enough of it was his. Before he knew it, he was running across rooftops and sneaking aristocrats out from under the harsh love-bite of Madame Guillotine.

He propped his elbow on the sill as the coach left Paris and pressed farther into the country. Was it still plagiarism if it came *before?* No matter: Baroness Orczy had always been the forgiving type. Especially when one came armed with gifts of tea and shortbread.

On approach, the Chateau d'Alarie looked nearly as abandoned as the TARDIS. The Doctor had heard that there was very little Alarie family left to fill it. Based on the correspondence he had received, only two remained. Françoise, the daughter of the house, had been hidden away when the revolutionaries came for her parents. Now, the young lady's only companion was her tutor, Marguerite: the same person who had sent for the Doctor.

Meet us inside, the letter had instructed. *I will explain further once*

I am sure you have not been followed. Transportation will be provided. Nothing unusual, all things considered; skullduggery was what made the job so appealing. But as he waved the coach on, the Doctor couldn't help but feel a bit of foreboding. As though he were walking into something larger, more secretive, and more sinister than himself. It was a feeling he'd worked hard to leave behind, but it poked at the edges of his mind now, like the worry of an unlocked back gate.

He started to tap out a quick rhythm on the door, but it fell open under the first knock. Whether that was a good sign or bad, he wasn't sure.

'Oh, good,' the Doctor said regardless, removing his hat and stepping inside. 'I've tried that knock at three other places so far. Everyone kept handing me pamphlets.'

'It's nice to see you're still in high spirits, Doctor. All things considered.'

The Doctor furrowed his brow, turning toward the voice – a woman's voice. He couldn't pinpoint the location, be it from odd acoustics or some trickery on the speaker's part. 'You sound familiar. I shouldn't be hearing familiar voices here.' He paced slowly down the dark hallway, poking his head through each doorway he passed. 'It's the primary thing I'm trying to avoid, really.'

'I'm flattered you remember me,' the voice said... warmly? No, that wasn't right. There was a fondness, but it wasn't friendly. It was the purr of a cat finally clapping eyes on the mouse it had been stalking.

The Doctor narrowed his eyes, holding very still indeed. 'Nelly?' It was possible. Not *probable,* but damned possible. He'd last seen Miss Rosethorne amidst the ensuing chaos on Liloth 7, waxing menacingly poetic about how she missed him. How *helpful* he'd been on their first meeting. How they could help each other, if only he weren't so *stubborn*. What a good *friend* she could be to him.

Now the voice laughed. A scoff of a laugh. 'I'm not sure whether to be flattered or insulted. The Witch of the White House is formidable, Doctor. Dangerous, even. But hardly comparable.'

He'd pinpointed the source of the voice. The study. He straightened his posture before stepping through the doorway. The

cocky grin he'd fixed in place wavered. Facing him was a woman of indeterminate middle years in a crimson dress, her auburn hair pulled back in a tight bun. Though she looked for all the world like a governess of this time and place, the Doctor's mind summoned up an image of her, younger, decades from now, serving chardonnay with a knowing wink.

'As I live and breathe,' he said through a rictus smile. 'Miss O'Heacha.'

'You're alone, Doctor.' Marguerite said this with no trace of surprise. 'You have been for some time. My sympathies.'

The Doctor waved his hat dismissively. 'No need. Rue's as happy as a very happy clam. In a century and a half, she'll be running her own casino. The Golden Gauntlet. Free drinks if you drop my name.'

Marguerite smiled indulgently. The cat comparison still hadn't left the Doctor's mind. 'And yet you feel compelled to continue your heroics, even without an audience.'

'Psychoanalysis doesn't come into vogue for another hundred years, you know.' The Doctor's forced grin remained, but the smile had left his eyes. 'If you've set up this entire scenario just for an opportunity to tell me what you think of me –'

'You think I would do that?'

'Yes, I very much do.' The grin slid away. 'What are you even doing here? Bit early for you to be running about on Earth, isn't it?'

The woman lowered her eyelids to half-mast serenely. 'Necessity knows no timeline, Doctor.'

'I see.'

Marguerite met his eyes again. 'The Sisterhood is facing its greatest trial yet. Our solution lies here, in this time and place.'

'What are the odds?' The Doctor circled around Marguerite to take in the rest of the study. It was dusty – abandoned in a hurry, but some time ago. A letter, presumably from the hand of Mama or Papa Alarie, lay half-written on the writing desk, the ink long since dried. A jagged scratch dragging off the page traced the path the writer's hand took as they were hauled away by force. If nothing else, the

foundation of Marguerite's story was true.

'We need your help.'

The Doctor fiddled with the lid of the ink well, its contents also long since dried. 'Correction: you need *help*. You *want my* help. I'm very flattered, and I can't blame you. I'd want my help, too. It's good help. But the answer is no. I'm done being an errand boy.'

'Even with the fate of the universe hanging in the balance?' Marguerite pressed.

This gave the Doctor pause. But a very short one. 'I'm out of the universe-saving business.'

'Oh, Doctor. We both know that can never be true.'

The Doctor placed his hat back atop his head in silence.

'At least meet the girl before you decide.' Marguerite gestured to the door. 'Give her the opportunity to earn your disdain before you abandon her.'

'The girl?'

Marguerite raised an eyebrow. 'Françoise Alarie. I wasn't lying to you, Doctor. She does need transport out of France. Very, *very* far out of France.'

* * *

She was, to the Doctor's eyes, a topiary of a girl: grown and trained to fit a certain aesthetic, with little regard for the structural integrity underneath. She was sixteen at the most, her skin fair, her hair such a pale blonde as to be nearly white. Stick-thin, too, but dressed to suggest that onlookers should be enamoured of her frailty rather than distressed by it. She was deep in a volume of Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian romances, seemingly unaware of anyone else's presence.

The Doctor leaned toward Marguerite. 'There's not much I can do for this one, I'm afraid,' he whispered. 'Have you tried giving her a bit more sunlight?'

'I *can* hear you.' The voice from the girl was surprisingly strong: clear, like a crystal bell rung loud enough to risk breaking. Her eyes,

pale as the rest of her, took the Doctor in from the ground up before turning back to her reading. ‘I won’t be ridiculed by a man a hundred years out of fashion.’

‘Still less out of date than your book,’ the Doctor muttered.

‘Mademoiselle Alarie was meant to make her society debut this year,’ Marguerite said. ‘Of course, circumstances made this inadvisable. Fortunately, she is needed elsewhere.’

‘Yes.’ The Doctor turned back to Marguerite, leaving Françoise to her reading. ‘Where, exactly?’

‘Karn.’

The Doctor whipped out his handkerchief and snickered into it.

‘With a few stops along the way,’ Marguerite went on over his muffled laughter. ‘Transportation will be provided, as I said. It’s nothing compared to your craft, of course, but it will get you where you need to go.’

‘You really intend for me to take this girl off-world? On a little tour of the galaxy? She’ll shatter into pieces as soon as we reach the Hôtel de Ville.’

‘I can still hear you,’ Françoise said.

Marguerite took the Doctor by the elbow and led him out of the sitting room. ‘We have searched up and down the timeline, throughout the history of this world and others. And there is no doubt in my mind: she is the one we are looking for.’

‘To do *what,* exactly?’

‘I fear telling you too much of our situation would risk the mission.’

The Doctor flattened his expression. ‘So you expect me to pick up a glass ornament of a girl, take her on a little jaunt around the stars, and then drop her off for a mission of galaxy-shaking importance, the details of which I am not at liberty to know.’ He glanced toward Françoise in the next room, her head bowed but her attention still likely focused fully on the conversation, then back at the Sister. ‘Not on your life.’

‘Doctor…’

‘I’ll take the girl somewhere safe,’ he conceded. ‘I’m not *that* much of a monster. But her feet shall not leave terra firma. Nor shall mine. I have contacts in London who can keep her in the manner to which she is accustomed.’

Marguerite sighed. ‘It is a shame. I *had* considered us friends, you know.’

‘Yes, well, that was your first mistake.’

‘That assumed friendship was why we all feigned ignorance when your… “overseers” came knocking.’

The Doctor grew still, his lip curling slightly.

‘They’re *ever* so eager to find you. Imagine what might happen if word of your current location were to slip out in conversation.’

‘You…’ The Doctor clenched his teeth. ‘Are you attempting to blackmail me?’

Marguerite looked at the Doctor levelly, with the calm of a veteran child-minder. ‘I would argue that I’m *succeeding,* Doctor.’

He inhaled sharply, stepping back and spinning on his heel. ‘I do this for you, I get the girl to Karn, and you keep my name out of your mouth.’

‘But of course.’ Finally, Marguerite smiled again. ‘What are friends for?’

* * *

As promised, the Doctor was provided with a craft that, while not as robust as his own TARDIS, was still TARDIS-like. The main console room was bland and silvery, about the size of a large sitting room. There were no intriguingly winding hallways to speak of: just two interior doors leading to spartan private quarters.

The pared-down craft barely needed any attention in flight, either. Marguerite explained that the coordinates for its first destination had already been programmed in, and it required only a capable pilot to stay the course. When the Doctor suggested chucking the young lady in and locking the doors until she was deposited safely

on Karn, he was met with a stern stare.

‘Your first stop is Baelnoth,’ Marguerite said, all business. ‘When you arrive, follow the map I’ve given you. One of my sisters will meet you there, to ensure that Mademoiselle Alarie is safe and… what are you doing?’

The Doctor paused, his hands resting on the writing desk he’d dragged halfway across the front garden. ‘I’m not flying about in an empty tin can. Give us a hand; I’m bringing a chair and a hat stand as well.’

Marguerite cast him a withering look. He shrugged and continued his furniture removal. ‘Once you’ve reported there,’ she went on, ‘you’ll receive your next set of coordinates. Then, if all is well, onward to Karn.’

‘Any particular reason why we’re not going straight to Karn?’

‘Yes.’

No further details were forthcoming, it seemed. ‘Right.’ He went to fetch the hat stand. Briefly free of him, Marguerite entered the craft. Françoise was just leaving one of the private rooms, running her hands over the chrome walls in wide-eyed silence. She’d been dressed down for the occasion; in simple trousers and a loose shirt, she looked like a waifish fairytale prince.

‘Must I really go with him?’ she asked, seeing Marguerite in the doorway in her periphery. ‘He doesn’t seem to think much of me.’

Marguerite smiled gently. ‘He will do what is necessary. He may fuss a bit along the way. But he will come through in the end.’

‘And me?’

‘You will, too.’

Françoise lowered her eyes. ‘But I don’t even know what’s expected of me. Mama always said I wasn’t fit to be a wife, or to be presentable in society, but now I’m meant to do something important?’

‘Madame Alarie was many things, rest her soul.’ Marguerite crossed the metal floor to stand by Françoise, placing a hand on her shoulder. ‘But an adequate judge of character, she was not. I trust

that, when the time comes, you will *also* do what is necessary.'

Françoise smiled shyly at Marguerite, but the moment was shattered by the sound of wooden furniture scraping across the floor. The older woman gave the younger one last pat on the shoulder before walking to the Doctor's side.

'Try not to keep Arana waiting,' she said gently, casting an eye up at the Doctor. 'She will give you as much information as is safe and your next set of instructions.' Then she broadened her gaze to the pair of them: the Doctor at her side, Françoise across the interdimensional space. 'And behave. Both of you.'

She swept out, the door sliding shut behind her.

'Madame Marguerite said we're going far outside France,' Françoise said quietly. 'How far did she mean?'

On the one hand, the Doctor wanted nothing more than to retire to his little room, make some strong tea, and wait out the trip in silence. On the other...

He turned around, doffing his hat and grinning broadly. 'How far, you ask? How far can you see on a clear night?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'The stars, Mademoiselle.' He raised a hand, indicating the unseen sky. 'That is where we're going, you and I. To the farthest reaches of your imagination and beyond. Unless, of course, your imagination is as exceptional as mine.' He tossed his hat toward the hat stand, missing it by several feet.

As he scrambled to retrieve his hat from the floor, he failed to catch the sudden sparkle in Françoise's eyes. At least, that's what Françoise assumed.

* * *

Baelnoth was known for many things. Its pristine architecture, for one: bright whites and pastels that somehow never showed dirt or wear, housing efficient homes and even more efficient laboratories. Its great minds, for another: geniuses from across the universe gathered here to

be part of far-reaching research that could change the universe.

The coffee, however, was dreadful.

The Citizen sipped thoughtfully at it, attempting to ignore the grit. He avoided looking directly at the dark-haired woman in red. She didn't know what he looked like, didn't even know his name. She may not even have known he or someone like him existed. But she'd done him an incredible service, likely without knowing it. For that, he was grateful.

He kept his eyes down, flipping a worn pocket watch open and shut, more of a tic than a deliberate movement. Each time the door of the little restaurant opened, it took all his willpower not to look up. He'd know when the game was afoot. He hadn't been able to dig up any information on the person of interest, but said person's escort would be unmistakable even at a distance.

'...it may *look* nice,' a voice cut over the gentle hum of the restaurant's daily operations, 'but there's one sure-fire way to test the quality of a place. Their club sandwich.'

'Their what?' a second voice, smaller and weaker, queried.

'You've... oh, well, of course you wouldn't have. Well, we'll take care of that while we're here, too.'

The Citizen tucked his pocket watch away and looked up, just long enough to save a picture of the two in his mind. The woman's guests had arrived. One was a girl: unremarkable in appearance, probably pretty by the standards of some long-forgotten time and place, and dressed down to make her even more unremarkable. The other guest was a tall, narrow man with long curly hair (wig or natural, it was difficult to tell from here) and a flashy hat and costume in blues and golds. If the goal had been deep cover, he clearly hadn't gotten the memo.

As the pair sat across from the woman in red, the Citizen fingered the communicator in his pocket. Not for the first time, it occurred to him how simple it would be to simply call in a sighting. Report the Doctor, separate his charge from him, and handle things that way. It would be a quicker, cleaner job, surely.

No. He clenched his fist in his lap. There were too many

imponderables, and too much of which he was still uncertain. And despite the possibility of a reward from on high for loyalty, the Citizen knew there was little likelihood of negotiating for what he really wanted. He reached into his opposite pocket, turning up the dial on his earpiece to zero in on the conversation a few tables away.

'...delivered, as promised,' the Doctor said, gesturing to the frail young woman. A sleek little robot had brought sleek little cups of tea to the table. The girl was holding hers in both hands, turning it around and around before taking a sip from it. Judging by her expression, Baelnoth's tea was as bad as its coffee.

The woman in red slid a small cube across the table to the Doctor. 'Excellent work. Of course, we expected nothing less. This has everything you need for the next leg of your journey. Your coordinates, as well as further information. Bearing in mind, of course, that there is still only so much we can tell you about this operation.'

'A lesser man would balk at all the secrecy.' The Doctor sniffed, stirring his tea but not actually drinking it. 'This hypothetical lesser man might also start to suspect that this is less about safety and more about dubious dealings, and look for the first possible opportunity to wash his hands of the whole thing.'

'Well.' The woman smiled placidly, in that way that only members of the Sisterhood of Karn seemed able to. 'How fortunate we are, Doctor, that you are not a lesser man.'

The Doctor snatched the little cube off the table. 'Indeed. Come along, Frankie. We apparently have places to be.' He swivelled up from his seat with a stylish flip of his jacket. The girl followed. When they had left the restaurant, the Citizen made his move. He rubbed his left thumb over the lid of the pocket watch, murmuring hushed words like a prayer as he pulled a short blade from his right cuff. *Charity first and last. Charity above all.*

'Not the sort of people you tend to see around here,' he said genially, sliding into the seat next to the sister. He put his right hand on her shoulder, letting the edge of the blade press against her arm. Not a threat, he told himself. Not a *proper* threat. Just a gentle urging.

The Sister tilted her head in the Citizen's direction, but didn't meet his gaze. 'They were rather interesting, weren't they?'

‘Very.’ The Citizen pressed a little harder, hearing the first layer of red silk pop under the little blade. ‘And I would be *most* interested to hear about them.’

* * *

‘My name isn’t Frankie.’

The Doctor sniffed. ‘It’s not my fault you have a stuffy name.’

‘At least my name is a name and not a title.’ Françoise looked around at the plain, pristine buildings. ‘Is this really another planet?’

‘Well, technically it’s a research satellite.’ The Doctor gestured around them. ‘Far smaller than your average planet, built on the third moon of the planet Noth. If we were on the other side, you’d be able to see…’ He paused, looking down at the girl. She was staring up at him, her eyes wide.

‘I’ve lost you, haven’t I?’

She shook her head. ‘No, not at all! It’s just.’ She looked at the buildings. ‘It looks different, but somehow it also looks the same. Just… a different same.’

‘People are the same all around, Fran. For better or for worse.’

‘My name’s not Fran, either.’

The Doctor smirked. ‘No pleasing you, is there? Off we go, then. The sooner we see what’s on this cube, the sooner we can both have the Sisterhood out of our hair.’

‘Back to the Exedra, then?’

‘The what?’

Françoise and the Doctor looked equally confused. ‘The Exedra,’ she repeated. ‘That’s what Madame Marguerite called it.’

‘If you say so.’

‘Why, what were you calling it?’

‘Worse TARDIS.’

The Exedra, as it was apparently called, was tucked away

between two smaller buildings. The Doctor waved Françoise in, closing the door behind them both, and hung his hat on the hat stand (properly this time). He took off before even investigating the little cube.

'Now,' the Doctor said, sitting in the pilfered chair he'd brought along. 'Tell me about the man at the table behind us.'

Françoise blinked. 'Who?'

'Surely you noticed him. He was staring holes in you, and looked rather confident that he wasn't.'

She frowned. 'Now that you mention it…'

'Describe him.'

Françoise jolted a bit at the sudden shift in the Doctor's voice. He was all business now. 'Erm… well… older, I suppose? He looked about my grandfather's age. Light hair. He looked… sad, almost. I think he had something on one ear.'

'It's not the best description, but it'll have to do.'

'Weren't you looking?'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. 'I couldn't exactly stare *back,* could I? Give the whole game away. You're new to all this. No one will bat an eye if you're looking around willy-nilly.'

'Oh,' said Françoise.

'I, on the other hand, curate an air of aloofness that strikes fear into the hearts of my foes.'

'I see.'

'One doesn't strike fear into the hearts of one's foes by gawping at everything with one's mouth hanging open.'

Françoise put a hand over her mouth self-consciously.

'No, whoever this fellow is, he's interested in us, which means he's part of this.' And now the Doctor finally took the cube from his pocket, dropping it into a square slot on the Exedra's minimalist console. He punched a few buttons. 'Now, let's see if the ladies want to tell us anything else.'

Françoise watched in surprise as a translucent image of the woman they'd been speaking to rose up from the console. It was blue and flickery, like some sort of spectre. The Doctor didn't seem at all surprised by this; he stood back, his hands clasped behind his back, watching and listening intently.

'Well done, Doctor,' said the flickering spectre of Arana. *'If you're watching this, it means we've made contact and you have the Dark-Bringer in tow.'*

'The what now?' The Doctor peered at Françoise. She peered back.

'I'm assuming your craft is in flight and only the two of you are watching. I'm afraid I don't know you by name, Dark-Bringer, but understand this: you have been chosen specially for this task, and it is of the utmost importance. The Doctor will explain.'

'Will I.' The Doctor's voice was a quiet snarl.

'Doctor,' the image went on, *'Karn is facing its darkest days yet. Once again, an outside force wishes to use the Elixir of Life for its own selfish ends. It seems the Sacred Flame is doomed to attract such pestilential moths for eternity. Thus, we have concluded that there is only one recourse: it must be snuffed out for good. This is not a decision we have arrived at lightly, nor is it one we relish. However, it is for the greater good.*

'The person in your charge is the only one who can do what needs doing. Guard them with your life. They, and you yourself, may already be in our enemy's crosshairs.'

The spectre of Arana faded, giving way to what Françoise recognised as a star map... but nothing like the kind she'd seen in the books she'd managed to have sneaked in for her. *'Your next port of call,'* Arana's voice went on, *'is the planet Ducrow. There, you will meet with Isora. She is also of our Sisterhood, and will give your companion the training required to accomplish their task. You will remain there, keeping watch, until the training is completed. At this point, you will bring the Dark-Bringer to Karn. We thank you once again for your cooperation, Doctor.'*

The star map faded. The spectral imagery went dark. The Doctor laughed, but there was nothing boisterous in it. It was cold and tired,

a laugh at something that was decidedly not funny.

'I'm going to make some tea,' he said suddenly, not looking her way. His voice was even harsher than before as he flipped a few switches on the console, then stormed off to his room. 'Proper tea that isn't terrible. You'll have some. We'll be there soon.'

A few minutes passed in awkward silence. Finally the Doctor returned, having shed his wig and jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves. The transformation was minimal in execution but all-encompassing in effect. Before, he'd been a flamboyant (if slightly moody) adventurer; now he was just a cross boy with messy hair. He held a brimming cup on a fancy saucer in each hand, glowering. Françoise hated to admit it, but there was something comforting about the honesty of it all.

'One for the Doctor…' He placed one cup on the console, then tromped across the room with the other. 'And one for Mademoiselle Swan.'

Françoise took the cup and saucer. 'My name isn't –'

The Doctor threw his hands up in exasperation. 'Well, you don't like the *first* half of your name. And I refuse to call you "Swozz." I don't think it means anything bad, but it sounds like it ought to.' He went back for his own tea, taking a sip. 'Besides. Swan Alarie. Sounds mysterious. Sounds interesting. Sounds less like whatever you had to be back home, I'd wager.'

'I suppose.' He had a point, and she hated that he had a point. Françoise was bad at dancing, bad at needlework, bad at talking with interest about anything ladylike. But nothing said Swan Alarie had to be any of those things. Maybe people would listen to Swan when she wanted to talk about other things. Maybe Swan could have spoken up and said she'd like to go to the other side of Baelnoth and see a planet from its moon.

'It also,' the Doctor went on, his voice a moody mumble, 'sounds far better than "Dark-Bringer."' His voice dropped into his chest as he uttered the title, defusing the honorific into a schoolyard insult.

'She said you'd explain.'

The Doctor pointed at his tea. 'After this. I need it.'

The two drank their tea in silence. Françoise... *Swan* (she tried it on mentally, imagined what it would be like to introduce herself that way to people from other worlds) ...usually took her tea weak. This was strong and bitter, unpleasantly dark. She winced at the first few sips. But there was something almost medicinal about it; it cleared her head through sheer brute force, and she started to wonder how she'd ever managed to drink it any other way.

'Now.' The Doctor placed his cup and saucer back down, then went to fetch his hat. Rather than putting it on, he plucked one of the feathers from it, wielding it like a quill. Much to Swan's surprise, it served its purpose without ink or paper. Glowing lines hovered between the two of them, taking the shape of a planet. He even gave the drawing a little nudge with the finger of his other hand, sending it spinning on its sketched axis in the air.

'This is Karn. Home of... some ladies.' He furrowed his brow, as though searching around for better wording, then shook his head, apparently content with it after all. 'Their base of operations changes, but this is their holy of holies. They're in charge of a flame, here.' He stopped the spin of the sketched Karn with one hand and marked a little X on the planet with his quill. 'Reasons, reasons, reasons, that flame makes a magic immortality potion. People want that potion, people aren't allowed to *have* that potion. So apparently now they've decided not to have the potion anymore, and they've interrupted my long holiday to get that handled for them.'

Swan lowered her eyes to the teacup, inspecting its floral pattern. 'And I'm the only person who can put out this flame.'

'It's...' The Doctor scratched his head, ruffling his hair even more. He looked legitimately bothered by something, bothered enough that the crossness of moments ago had started to fade. 'That's what they said. But...'

'But what?'

He swished his hand through his visual aid, dispersing it into motes of light, and began pacing back and forth. 'Something's wrong. With all of this. We're still not being told everything.'

'Maybe it's because of that man. The one who was watching us. Maybe Arana was worried he'd hear this message.'

‘No, it’s not that kind of…’ The Doctor stopped in his pacing, jerking his head up toward the ceiling of the Exedra. ‘But if that’s the case, then why…’

There was a gentle juddering as the Exedra came to ground. The Doctor shook his head, clearly still not satisfied with wherever his train of thought had taken him. ‘No time,’ he muttered. He rushed back to his room, returning with a pair of gaudy blue earrings. ‘Put these on.’

Swan frowned. ‘No.’

‘Yes.’

‘They look like they fell off a chandelier.’

‘You’re in no position to be picky, Mademoiselle Dark-Bringer.’ When she continued to scowl at them, he pressed them into her hand. ‘I’m supposed to keep an eye on you, yes? These will help.’

Swan held one of them up. The teardrop-shaped gem was the same shade of blue as the cameo at the top of the Doctor’s chatelaine… which, now that she looked closely at it, had *his* profile carved into it. ‘Because you’ll be able to see me for a mile?’

The Doctor began rubbing one of his temples. ‘Don’t make me say please.’

The thought seemed to truly pain him, so Swan put the earrings on. They didn’t exactly go with the rest of her ensemble; however, the Doctor seemed less pained once she obliged. He began putting himself back together: shirtsleeves down and buttoned, jacket retrieved from his room, hat and wig back on.

‘Right, then.’ He offered an arm, his gallantry back in place. ‘Time for your first day of school.’

* * *

Ducrow was even more reminiscent of Earth, and the Doctor could see the already faint glimmer leave Swan’s eyes when they stepped out of the Exedra. ‘Not to your liking?’

Swan shook her head – not in the negative, but thoughtfully. ‘I

suppose when you look up at all those sparkling gems in the sky, you expect they look strange and beautiful up close. Not… like this.'

The town they'd landed in looked for all the world like something out of the Wild West. Not that Swan would have any point of reference for that. But dusty streets were dusty streets, no matter when you were from. Paper notices printed in an alien language depicted faces, humanoid and otherwise, over a listing of their various crimes and how much the local constabulary considered the stopping of those crimes to be worth. Noise complaints, livestock theft, fighting in the streets… The Sisterhood of Karn weren't exactly picking prime spots for Swan's first view of the wider universe.

'It's not all like this,' the Doctor assured her. 'Ducrow isn't exactly the best place for a holiday. The locals are notoriously insular, willing to blame anything on anyone provided they get to slap someone in stocks or see a hanging. Far less willing to admit that their problems are largely home-grown. But it's not all grim out here.' He reached over to pat the hand that rested on his opposite arm. 'There are some truly beautiful places.'

'I'd like to see them,' she said, her voice hesitant. As though she'd asked for the impossible. 'Those beautiful places.'

The Doctor tilted his head down at her. Good heavens, she was small; painfully light on his arm, and more painful still when he thought about how her parents must have been pleased about how light she'd be on a man's arm. And what would happen to her when all this was over? Would the Sisterhood have a place for her in their new, Sacred Flame-less future? Would they snap up one last recruit for their ranks after all? Or would he be expected to deposit her back on Earth? She was a child – and not just in the sense that most people he met were children by comparison. She was a little girl expected to be an adult by her family, and now expected to be a different sort of adult by a group of strangers.

It was just another thing that didn't sit right with him. The Sisterhood lifting this Earthbound girl off the planet for… what? And not even a bit of preamble for her from Marguerite? It made the back of his neck prickle the more he thought about it.

For his last four grounded years since parting way with Rue, a

nasty little thought had intruded on his mind. Why *not* just take off? Why *not* just take the TARDIS and run? Could he really be stopped? It was intruding again now, as he marched Swan off to be trained up for an interplanetary conflict that shouldn't even involve her. Why *not* just run off and take her somewhere else? Let the Sisterhood tell the powers that be. He could run faster and farther, surely. He'd saved Rue from the Gauntlet; maybe he could save Swan from the Sisterhood. And if he could save *them*...

But, whether through force of habit or sheer cowardice, he continued toward their set destination.

The meeting place was an inn of some sort. They had been given no description of Isora, but the Doctor suspected the Sisterhood's bright red attire would be easy enough to spot in this washed-out town. The conversation with Swan had trailed off, to the point that he barely remembered that she was there. When her hands squeezed tighter around his arm, he jumped, suddenly remembering his charge.

'Doctor...'

'Yes, still me, I'm afraid.'

Swan looked up at the drab buildings on either side of them. 'I feel...'

'Nervous? Worried? A bit underinformed and manipulated?'

'... watched.'

They both stopped walking. He felt it, too.

The light pressure on his arm was ripped away in time with a shriek. The Doctor turned just in time to see a cloaked figure putting distance between them, his charge slung over one shoulder. 'Swan!' He raced after the figure, pursuing it down an alley, but lost track of it almost immediately.

Cursing under his breath, the Doctor hopped backward, resuming his previous trajectory. But now he took it at a mad dash, clapping his hat close to his head with one hand. On any other day, he'd have delighted in leaning into the setting and making his entrance with the slow, measured pace of a lawman. But there was simply no time. He burst through the front doors of the inn, scrambling to a stop. There was no innkeeper on duty to stare or

protest: just a woman in red, standing in the centre of the room.

'She's gone,' the Doctor gasped. 'Swan, she's been taken.'

'Who?' The sister, likely Isora, was as insufferably placid as the rest of them.

'Who!? Your girl! Your blasted Dark-Bringer! Who else would be with me!?'

Isora continued to stare.

'It was someone in a grey cloak. My height or a little shorter, at my best guess.' The Doctor pointed, his hand shaking with the adrenaline. 'We were just –'

'What do you expect me to *do,* Doctor?'

The Doctor stared back in shocked silence, then sputtered out a laugh. 'I don't know! Something! This is your big project, surely you have a contingency plan in place for your chosen one being compromised?'

The placid stare did not shift.

'You don't *have* a plan, do you?' He sneered in quiet disbelief. 'I knew something was wrong here. It's a mess. This whole thing.' He turned and ran for the door, then pivoted back, jabbing a finger at Isora. 'You stay there. I have words for you later.'

The Doctor dashed back out into the street, running toward the landing site of the Exedra. He'd popped it behind a silo for safekeeping. But just as he came into view of the craft, it grew dim and translucent.

'No, no, no!' He made a dive for the door, but the borrowed craft dematerialised just as his hand would have grazed it. He stumbled forward, landing face-first in the impression left behind in the sandy ground.

For a while, he lay there, with no interest in getting back up. Now or ever. But the longer he lay still, the more his brain ticked over. All the pieces he'd gathered started to fit together, and the picture they were forming was utterly disgusting.

'Always the way, isn't it, Rue?' He turned his head, pressing a cheek against the ground. 'I'm the last to know the plan.' What would

she say if she were here? Very little, probably. She'd pluck his hat from his heat and strut about in it, calling him a grumpy boy and kicking 'til he got up. Maybe she'd pull a knife from the folds of her newest dress and raise her eyebrows – *Need someone killed?* Either way, he'd have gotten up, dusted himself off, and made some valiant threat or other. Just to see the smile it elicited. Or the long-suffering shake of the head.

Rue had enough to make her smile now. She had everything she'd ever wanted. She didn't need his nonsense. Not anymore.

But that little voice in the back of his head piped up again. The one that mused about stealing his TARDIS and running away. The one that insisted every encounter was a preamble to a duel, that every chandelier was a challenge.

Someone else needs you now.

Just as the thought wheedled its way toward the front of his mind, he heard Swan's voice. It was garbled and unintelligible, but he'd know it anywhere. He lifted his head.

His chatelaine.

He sat up, swiping sand off his face and clothes. One of the trinkets on the old-fashioned keychain looked a bit like an earpiece – because that's exactly what he'd made it from. He detached it from its chain and hooked it into one ear. He listened in silence for a few moments. Then he grinned so broadly it made his face ache.

'Mademoiselle Swan, you clever girl!'

* * *

Swan had fainted many times before in her life, but she'd always woken up on a couch or in a bed afterward. This was new. She was in a chair, her hands and feet bound tightly with rough rope. The room she was in was large and dim, with a small square of light coming in from a high window. A vertical line cut the quicky-fading late afternoon light in half. As her eyes adjusted to her surroundings, she saw that the line was a rope hanging from a pulley. Some kind of storage building, then?

‘If this is about the Sacred Flame,’ she said to whoever might be listening, her voice shaking, ‘I can’t help you.’ She hated how her voice sounded: nervous and bleating, like a lamb about to be slaughtered. She thought of the Doctor’s voice, pompous and cross even in the midst of uncertainty. What was it he’d said? Curating an air of aloofness to strike fear into the hearts of his enemies. She sat up straighter. ‘You might have at least waited to kidnap me until after I learned a bit more.’

There was a rustling sound from a dark corner. Her breath hitched in her throat. She hadn’t realized just how close her captor was. ‘The less you know, my dear, the better.’

And now he came into view, casting his cloak aside and standing in the beam of late-day light. It was the man she’d seen on Baelnoth: the older man who’d been watching them in the restaurant.

‘All I know,’ Swan said, attempting to keep her voice even, ‘is that someone wants this magic elixir. And I’m supposed to stop them getting it. It’s all a bit over my head.’

‘It is, isn’t it?’ The man’s tone was almost sympathetic. ‘It hurts my heart to see you brought into this conflict… a conflict that shouldn’t exist, really.’ He paced around her, the way she imagined villains in novels must do. In one hand he held a pocket watch, which he flipped open and closed. ‘Tell me, my dear. Have you lost someone close to you?’

Swan frowned. ‘My parents.’ It was funny; it had happened so quickly, and with so little fanfare, that she’d barely had time to think about it. One moment everything was normal, the next her parents had bundled her into an airing cupboard and told her everything would be fine. Then the shouting came. Then came Madame Marguerite, as if by magic, *also* telling her everything would be fine… but with far more certainty. Intellectually she knew what had happened to her parents. But now it all hit her at once. Her eyes and nose stung. She felt dizzy.

The man’s face softened into a sad smile. ‘My condolences. Was it slow?’

‘They say the guillotine is quite swift,’ Swan said quietly, feeling a tear slide down her cheek. She tried to raise a hand to wipe it away,

but only ended up chafing her wrists more.

'What if I told you that a race exists who need not know such sadness? Who could weather illness and walk away from execution?'

'I'm a bit too old for fairytales.'

'You know at least one such person,' the man said. He stopped pacing and fidgeting, standing still in front of her and putting a hand to his chest. 'And now you know two.'

Swan stared. She shook her head briskly, to clear her eyes of their tears and her head of this man's nonsense. As she did, she felt the Doctor's ridiculous earring slap against her cheeks.

I'm supposed to keep an eye on you, yes? These will help.

She wasn't sure how that was meant to work. But she knew this Doctor flew her away from home in a magic box. He had that quill pen, too: the one that had drawn lines of light in the air. Perhaps these earrings worked via some similar magic? If they were anything like his magic quill, then there was at least a modicum of sense to them.

Ears. Hearing...

'What if I told you,' the man went on, 'that this race, rather than sharing their discovery with the universe, kept it to themselves?'

'I would say you're blocking my view of the two moons through that nice big window up there,' Swan said, more calmly than she felt.

'Mademoiselle Swan, you clever girl!'

Swan tried to keep her expression from shifting at the sound of the Doctor's voice. It was like he was speaking directly into her ear, but at a distance. Then she was right: these earrings allowed him to hear her, and vice versa.

'Large high-up window facing... let's see, the moons of Ducrow rise in the northeast...' The Doctor's voice hitched a bit every few seconds. He must have been running. *'Keep him talking. Give me whatever information you can, but try not to make it obvious.'*

Swan started to nod, realised what she was doing, and shifted it to a deliberate look down. 'Could... you at least untie my feet? I'm not exactly going to walk out of a closed barn door with my hands still tied.'

‘You’re fine as you are, I think.’

‘Can I at least know who I’m talking to?’

The man raised an eyebrow. ‘My loyalty is to the people – *all* the people of the universe. You may call me the Citizen.’

‘This race of immortals really likes titles for names, doesn’t it?’

The Citizen knelt in front of Swan, opening the pocket watch. Inside the cover was a tiny, detailed painting of a woman. Her hair was vibrant red, her skin pale. Swan looked from the portrait to the Citizen. ‘She’s beautiful,’ she said quietly.

‘Inside and out,’ the Citizen agreed, his smile sad. ‘But, like you, Charity was born of a people without the gifts your Doctor and I have received. This portrait is, by the reckoning of humans, quite old. I only want to give her more time.’ The smile melted from his face, and he rose to his feet again. ‘But apparently that is not to be. Apparently, the idea of allowing her to go on living is so foul to the Sisterhood of Karn that it warrants upending their entire reason for existing.’

‘And that,’ said a voice from on high, ‘was my first clue that something was amiss.’

The Citizen turned. Swan raised her head. Standing in the large window, little more than a silhouette in the fading daylight, was the Doctor: one hand propped on a hip, the other gripping the rope that hung from the pulley.

‘Well,’ the Citizen said, his once sympathetic voice frozen over. ‘If it isn’t the lapdog, back to do his owners’ dirty work.’

‘Purely freelance today, actually.’ The Doctor gave the rope an experimental tug, then hopped off the windowsill. He alighted on the ground and removed his hat in greeting. ‘Apologies for the lateness, Mademoiselle Swan. It took me some time to get up to the window.’

‘Couldn’t you have come through the door?’

The Doctor pointed angrily at the window. ‘And miss out on that entrance? Did you not *see* my entrance? It was extremely good.’

Swan agreed that it was extremely good; but she got the feeling that admitting this would cause more problems than it solved.

‘I must ask you to reconsider, Doctor.’ The Citizen’s voice had

not lost its new layer of frost, but Swan could hear the tone of appeal underneath. *See reason, man. Understand you're the one in the wrong.*

The Doctor quirked a brow at the Citizen, walking backwards toward the wall as he did so. 'I haven't even said what I intend to do yet.'

'You're here to save the girl.' The Citizen flicked one wrist outward, and a short blade fell into his hand. He held it in front of him, pointed at the Doctor, like a petty thief about to demand a wallet. 'Even though you and I both know what she can do.'

'About that...' The Doctor reached toward something long and thin propped against the wall, directing his gaze at Swan. 'You can get yourself free, right?'

'Of course I can't!' Swan shouted.

'At least try. *You,* on the other hand...' The Doctor whipped the object he'd grabbed in front of him like a fencing foil. It slipped heavily from his hand and thumped on the ground. Both men looked down at the pitchfork, then at each other.

'Come now,' the Doctor said with a grin, 'we're both men of honour –'

Just as the Citizen raced to close the distance between them, the Doctor dropped swiftly to grab the pitchfork. Swan let out a gasp of shock as the short blade in the Citizen's hand whiffed by, slicing a small curl from the Doctor's wig. If the Doctor noticed this had happened, he didn't let on. He sprang back to his feet, holding the pitchfork in both hands like a spear, and turned a full circle before clapping eyes on the Citizen again.

'As I was saying,' he began, but the Citizen ran up on him again. This time, the Doctor brought the end of the pitchfork up, catching the Citizen's wrist harmlessly between two prongs. The other man fumbled his short blade, dropping it.

'Would you *please*,' the Doctor shouted, shaking the pitchfork a bit, 'calm down for a *minute?* I'm going to forget my entire monologue at this rate!'

'You still insist on protecting that girl? She will singlehandedly destroy the universe's final chance at equality.'

The Doctor wrinkled his nose thoughtfully, manoeuvring the pitchfork each time the Citizen attempted to free his wrist. 'Doubtful, for two reasons. Reason 1: It seems unlikely that your plan is the final chance at anything. The universe is big. Full of people ready to try again. Reason 2...' And he looked over at Swan with what almost looked like regret. Or perhaps an unspoken apology. 'She is not as powerful as you've been led to believe.'

The Citizen used the break in eye contact to struggle free and make a grab for his blade, but the Doctor lowered his pitchfork with eerie precision without looking back. The prongs were now pressed against the Citizen's throat, the Doctor's hand steady. A far cry from the fumble of moments ago, Swan noticed. She wasn't sure if that was reassuring or frightening.

'It bothered me, you see. Something about this whole scenario felt wrong from the beginning. And then it hit me...' The Doctor looked back at the Citizen, shifting his grip on the pitchfork and circling around to kick the discarded blade away. Interposed between the Citizen and his captive, he raised his head, his eyes still on the other man.

'Why would the Sacred Flame need keepers if only one person in all of creation could extinguish it?'

The Citizen's look of quiet anger melted slowly.

The Doctor continued, his voice dropping into a hushed tone. 'The Elixir of Life has nearly fallen into fouler, nastier hands than yours. If the Sisterhood wouldn't close down operations then, why would they do it over one lovelorn man?'

'This isn't about *me,* Doctor.'

'Oh, of *course* it's about you. Don't try to pass off heartbreak as altruism.' He stared at the Citizen, ascertaining whether he planned to move. Satisfied that he wouldn't, the Doctor plunged the pitchfork's tines into the dirt. 'It's that melodrama that got you caught, after all. How hard would it have been for a well-placed Sister to whisper a rumour in your ear? You get a whiff of an idea that someone might stand in your way, and of *course* you leap into action. That brings you out of the shadows, lets the Sisterhood find out who's coming for their precious elixir. While you're off killing an innocent girl, they prepare

for your arrival. Call in a few favours. Then when you land on Karn, ready to fill up the tank…' He shrugged. 'Well, who's to say what they'd do? They're a funny bunch when it comes to punishment.'

The Citizen had pulled the watch from his pocket again, looking at the portrait inside. 'Then come with me,' he whispered. The frost had chipped from his voice. He looked up at the Doctor. 'We've both been played for fools by these women.'

'True.'

'Is this a status quo you really mean to uphold?' The Citizen smiled, as though the fighting and threats were water under the bridge. 'Come, now, it's no secret what you think of your keepers. How keen you are to slip the leash. Why not help me? Stick it to them, to the Sisterhood, all in one fell swoop. You want to, don't you?'

The smug coldness melted from the Doctor's face. 'Of course I do. Every day.'

'Then –'

'But not with someone as unreliable as you. Swan?'

The Citizen choked; likely because of the length of rope currently pressed against his windpipe. Looped through either side of it were a pair of slender, pale wrists.

'Carefully, please, Swan. He's exceedingly hard to kill, but I don't want to risk you having that on your conscience even so.' He stepped aside, a magician presenting the prestige, to show Swan's empty chair. The Citizen started to reach behind him to grapple the girl, but the Doctor retrieved the pitchfork and pressed it meaningfully against the man's midsection.

'When did –'

The Doctor smirked. 'You really are easily distracted. Now, the Sisterhood is likely expecting you to arrive so they can corner you with whatever backup they've enlisted. I have a much more entertaining idea, which requires you staying here. I assume your TARDIS is parked nearby?'

The Citizen nodded.

'Swan, *do* let up.'

Swan released her grip on the Citizen. ‘Should I tie his wrists?’

‘Yes, why not? Seems fair under the circumstances.’

As Swan tied the Citizen’s hands behind his back, the Doctor retrieved the discarded short blade. ‘So inelegant,’ he muttered. He held it between his thumb and forefinger at a distance as he walked it over to the chair recently vacated by Swan. ‘Once we leave, you’ll have a bit of time to free yourself. Then it’s just a matter of whether the locals find you before you get to your craft. Either way, I shouldn’t worry. The Ducrovians are generally much less ironic in their punishments than the Sisterhood. If you think about it, I’ve done you a favour.’

‘I’ve done nothing to the people of this planet,’ the Citizen snarled.

‘That’s never stopped them before. Swan?’

The two made their exit at a casual pace, bolting the door behind them.

‘I told you I couldn’t get out of those ropes,’ Swan said quietly as they walked up the street.

‘And I knew that was nonsense. And, as usual, I was right. Well done me.’

Swan stared at her wrists, raw and red from her struggle to escape. ‘You believed in me, even when I told you I couldn’t do it.’

The Doctor waved a hand. ‘I had backup plans.’ He continued to stride along, not realising Swan’s arm had slipped from his. When he heard a gentle sob from a few feet behind him, he froze.

‘Oh, dear. Oh, no. No, no, no,’ the Doctor tutted, whipping a handkerchief out of his jacket pocket. ‘Here. Listen. You can cry all you want later. I certainly won’t stop you.’ He handed her the handkerchief, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and herding her to the end of the street. ‘Might do a bit myself. But we have things to do first.’

‘What things?’ Swan’s voice was muffled by tears and the handkerchief.

‘Sticking it to the Sisterhood, mainly.’

Swan looked up, her tearstained face shocked. ‘You’re not going to –’

The Doctor raised a hand. ‘I think you’ll enjoy this, actually.’ And, putting a hand to the cameo on his chatelaine, he pressed.

The air around the Doctor and Swan swirled, kicking up the sand and dead plant life of Ducrow. Swan’s tears were all but forgotten as she attempted to make sense of the unearthly, creaking, groaning sound around her.

* * *

‘He is here,’ one of the Sisters said, no surprise whatsoever in her voice.

The TARDIS faded into view on Karn, shaking off four years’ worth of vines in an elegant flurry of rose petals. The five red-robed women assembled themselves in a semicircle around the entrance as the doors opened, and a confused Swan Alarie stumbled out.

‘Ta-da!’ This was not uttered by Swan.

The Doctor poked his head around the doorway. ‘One Dark-Bringer, as requested. Sorry, she didn’t get the training she needed on Ducrow. We lost our borrowed time machine, too. Had to call for mine. Of course, that was the plan all along, eh?’

The Sisters’ faces remained uniformly impassive.

‘No contingency plan for if something happened to your chosen one.’ The Doctor stepped up next to Swan, joining her in the centre of the semicircle. ‘Making off with our transportation. Oh, and the fact that you don’t need a special initiate to extinguish the Sacred Flame. You just need a few millennia of bad flue maintenance.’ He threw on his wickedest smile. ‘You didn’t need me as a bodyguard. You needed me as a distraction, buying you enough time to gather information on your culprit and call for reinforcements. Whom I expect will be here any second now.’

The tallest of the sisters, olive-skinned and dark-eyed, twitched up a corner of her mouth in what might generously be described as a smile. ‘It would appear you have it all figured out, Doctor. Save for

one small misconception.'

'What's that?'

'The reinforcements have already arrived.'

The Doctor turned a full circle, looking behind himself and the group. Then he faced the tallest sister again and jabbed a finger at his own chest with a questioning stare. 'Me?'

'And you performed your role admirably. We would have preferred you bring the Citizen to us, of course, but we had a feeling you might leave him to the discretion of the locals.'

The Doctor lowered his eyes in thought. 'Hence... having us cross paths on Ducrow.'

The sister's smile became more defined. 'Precisely.'

'And Baelnoth?'

'Arana likes their sandwiches.'

'Well.' The Doctor put a hand on Swan's shoulder, his posture tense. 'This has been very fun. Delightful, as always. Give Miss O'Heacha my regards.' His expression darkened. 'But please do your best to never need me again.' He ushered Swan into the TARDIS, slamming the door behind both of them.

'I must say,' the tallest sister said to the veiled sister by her side as the TARDIS departed, 'he performed exactly as you predicted. Well done.'

The veiled Sister watched the time craft disappear into the ether. 'He's changed quite a bit since I saw him last. In fairness, we both have.' She looked off into the distance. 'At least in my case, I had the luxury of choice when my world changed. A chance to become more. But he's still a foolish boy underneath it all. Poking his nose where it doesn't belong. Restless, really. But that restlessness could do great things if directed properly.'

'O'Heacha made an excellent choice in that young lady,' the tall Sister observed. 'I stand corrected. But I'm still not convinced she's enough to catalyse him to rebellion.'

'She doesn't need to be. She only needs to keep the flame burning. One day, he'll break free. It doesn't need to be now. Just

someday.' The veiled sister raised her eyes to the dark sky. 'I see it in him now. But if I see it, others will, too.'

* * *

Another pot of bitter tea had been made. Fortunately, the Doctor's time and space machine was far better outfitted than the one the Sisterhood had lent them. After some time lost in its halls, Swan returned with a pitcher of milk and a bowl of sugar to take the edge off her cup.

The Doctor waved away her offer of both milk and sugar. He was bent over the console, his hat and wig once again off (which Swan was beginning to learn was a sign that there was no time for theatrics), sliding bits of machinery this way and that.

'Of course,' he muttered, taking an enormous swig of very bitter tea, 'this destroys the entire point of everything.'

'What does?'

'This.' He gestured to the console. Seeing Swan's confused expression as she stirred her tea, the Doctor sputtered into an explanation. 'This... as long as she's active, there are people who can find me.'

Swan nodded slowly. 'These. Keepers of yours?'

'"Keepers" is both a terrible and correct word for them.' He patted the console gently. 'Never you mind,' he said affectionately, and Swan realised he was speaking to the craft. 'It's not your fault. I'm happy to have you back, you know that.'

The lights around them turned a bit pink, then faded back to their normal white. Had Swan imagined that?

'The point *is,* now they can find me. And I'd very much rather they not. So I'm trying to figure out how to scramble my spatio-temporal identifiers to –'

'Oh,' said a cheerful voice from all around them, 'I wish you wouldn't. Not when we've just found you again.'

The Doctor froze like a rabbit in front of a wolf. Swan nearly

spilled her tea. ‘Who’s that?’ she mouthed. The Doctor shook his head, his eyes wide.

‘Not that I blame you for taking a few years away, of course.’ The voice was deep and plummy, like a slightly tipsy Father Christmas. Swan realised it must be coming through some apparatus in the TARDIS, much as she’d heard the Doctor’s voice through her earrings – though more overwhelming in volume. ‘After everything that happened with the Order of the Spheres, those blighters. I said no, no, let him be alone. He’s been through a lot. He *deserves* it.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Oh, we’ve not met officially. But we will!’ The voice rose playfully. ‘We have quite a little Doctor-Do list built up. But it’s all things you’ll enjoy, I promise. Oh, I *do* look forward to meeting you in person. Highlight of my day. Whatever day that ends up being.’

The Doctor scrambled back to the controls, throwing switches this way and that.

‘Calm down, my boy, calm down,’ the voice chuckled. ‘Heavens, as if I’d *force* you anywhere. No, first you’ll need to drop off your charge. If you want a little time to wrap things up back in Paris, feel free. Not too long, of course. For your benefit, not mine. I don’t want you to feel rushed when you come back.’

‘I *asked* who you are,’ the Doctor snapped, glaring up at the ceiling of the TARDIS.

‘I know you did.’ The voice was oddly sympathetic, almost apologetic, but less genuine and more like a parent denying a child a sweet before supper. ‘I much prefer in-person introductions, though. Suffice to say, it’s been agreed that someone of your... temperament could use a firmer hand. A minder of sorts. I went a great deal of trouble for you, taking on a new life more amenable to your... excesses. I would much prefer to consider us friends.’

The Doctor grimaced. ‘I’m sure you would.’

‘Off you pop, then. I’ll give you one week relative time as a grace period. It’s the least I can do. See you soon, Doctor! *So* looking forward to working with you.’

The voice went silent, leaving the Doctor and Swan alone with

the gentle buzzing of the TARDIS.

‘You’re taking me home, then.’ Swan looked down at her hands.

The Doctor drained his teacup and refilled it from the porcelain pot next to him. ‘Now, when did I say that?’

‘But –’

‘I don’t need a minder,’ he snapped. ‘And frankly, it would be irresponsible to take you back home. I mean, imagine.’

Swan felt the tension in her shoulders ease. But then the Doctor kept talking.

‘You’re hardly fit for a society debut as you stand, are you?’ He gestured to her, still dressed down in trousers and one of the Doctor’s old shirts. ‘Look at you. Can you even hold a sword?’

‘I wasn’t aware that was necessary.’

The Doctor wiped a hand across his brow. ‘Right.’ He began pacing around the console room, ticking things off on his fingers. ‘Fencing. Galactic history at *least.* Languages… we’ll start within the solar system just to keep things simple. Public speaking. Lockpicking…? Yes, lockpicking couldn’t hurt.’

Swan stood up, still gripping her teacup. ‘What are you talking about, Doctor?’

‘I’m not dropping you anywhere until I’m satisfied you’ve had a decent education. High society has clearly failed you, so it falls to me to pick up the slack.’ He paused in his pacing. ‘What?’

‘Astronomy?’

The Doctor puffed out a laugh. ‘Well, *obviously.’*

Swan beamed. And the Doctor, despite the thoughts crowding his mind, beamed back.

The Doctor was on Karn now*, he realised as the plumed adventurer faded. He didn't remember why, of course, but the tang of the dusty air was unmistakeable, all electricity and exotic minerals. The Sisterhood were still on Karn, he supposed. And it seemed that they owed him a favour.*

Well, that might come in useful yet. By now his body was dying under Morbius's onslaught, he was sure of that, but perhaps that was not quite the catastrophe it might otherwise have been. Perhaps, if he was very lucky, Sister would be in soon with his medicine.

The next face swimming into view was another bearded one, a goatee and moustache this time. Dark shoulder-length hair, a wry smile, a wide-brimmed hat the Doctor thought looked rather good on him.

This one... well, this time round there was no avoiding it. This one had been a father. An explorer and inventor, to be sure, but a father was the most important thing he had been.

Well, the Doctor had been stranger things, he expected, even if he was presently unable to remember most of them. How hard could parenthood have been, compared with averting an alien invasion? It would have been fun, surely, bringing up some junior Doctor who could follow in his father's footsteps.

SCIENTIFIC ADVISOR
by Daniel Tessier

Cedric was playing with the console again. It hadn't been very long since he'd finally been able to reach over the wide rim platform that acted as a safety bar, and even less time since he could actually reach all but the most innocuous of buttons. Now that he could, though, he was grabbing levers and tugging pulleys and twirling nubbins like nobody's business.

Fortunately, the Doctor had child-proofed the Ship a long time ago. Even more fortunately, no one had yet Doctor-proofed it, so he was able programme the Space-Time Coordinator and travel anywhere he wanted. Well, he usually could.

Cedric would have had no clue how to programme the Ship's flight path, even if he'd had the attention span to pick a destination and stick with it for more than two minutes. He also had no clue that his father had utilised isomorphic controls to lock him out of all but the most trivial functions, so that he'd have been unable to fly the Ship even if he'd known how. Not that it mattered. He enjoyed playing with the controls as it was.

'Young man,' said the Doctor, entering the cavernous control room, 'time for bed.' He stood by one of the girders that supported the control room's structure, appearing to be made from wrought iron, although in reality it was something so complex it could barely be described as material. Cedric continued playing with the console, several feet away in the centre of the room.

'Cedric,' stated the Doctor, his firm tone communicating all it needed to. The boy, his hair somehow as tousled as if he'd been rolling in the grass all afternoon, turned to him.

'Five more minutes?' he pleaded.

The Doctor smiled, but shook his head. He walked over to the console and flipped a switch. Immediately, the various light sources in the room, from the Tiffany lamp in the corner to the twinkling starscape that hung above, dimmed to the barest of glimmers.

Cedric looked around the control room nervously. Even after so long aboard the Ship, he found the space unsettling in the dark, the ivy-strewn grey stone (or at least, what appeared to be stone) becoming a morass of foreboding shadow.

'All right, Father,' he relented.

The Doctor took his little hand in his own, and led from the darkened room.

It was only a short stroll from the control room to Cedric's bedroom. It had once been both his and Jilly's room, but now the girl was reaching the age where she really couldn't share with her little brother. They were both growing up so fast, thought the Doctor, especially Jilly. If only their mother was still here. He could really have used her advice.

The room that was now purely Cedric's was as tidy as a boy's room could reasonably be, which was to say, not at all. Chapbooks and children's encyclopaedias, wooden toys and eccentric extraterrestrial contraptions, drawings and scribblings and screwed-up artistic write-offs littered the floor. *The Beano Book* lay open atop a tray of conkers. The Doctor carefully stepped over the scattered objects, knowing that he should really admonish the boy for the mess, but unable to bring himself to do so.

Cedric quickly changed into his chequered pyjamas and climbed into bed.

'Is it too late for a story, Father?' he asked, hopefully.

'It's never too late for a story,' said the Doctor, sitting on the edge of the bed. He called out for Jilly. A moment later, she popped her head round the door.

'Yes, Father?' asked the girl, looking a little annoyed at being interrupted in the middle of whatever girls her age do. *I'm sure I should remember,* thought the Doctor. *It wasn't that long ago that I –*

'Father's going to tell us a story,' said Cedric, excitedly.

'Oh, really, I'm too old for stories,' sighed Jilly.

'Nonsense!' the Doctor chided. 'No one's ever too old for stories. Was King Shahryar too old for stories? Were the Brothers Grimm?'

‘Oh, alright,’ said Jilly, after commendably little arm-twisting. In the absence of any actual seat, she sat cross-legged on the floor by the bed, smoothing her skirt down carefully.

‘Now...’ pondered the Doctor, thoughtfully stroking his beard. ‘What shall I tell you tonight?’ He searched the cavernous reaches of his memory. ‘Have I told you about the one about the knocking in the mineshaft?’

‘Yes,’ said the children in unison.

‘How about the planet of the invisible arachnids?’

‘Yes,’ they said again.

‘Well, what about the time I came face-to-face (to-face-to-face) with the legendary three-headed –’

‘Yes!’ they chorused.

‘Oh.’ The Doctor’s moustache drooped in disappointment. ‘Well, there must be plenty of stories I haven’t told you. I’ve been around a while, you know...’

‘Why don’t you tell us one about Mother?’ asked Jilly.

The Doctor sighed. He should have known this was coming. It had been a while since they’d spoken about their mother, but he knew they were always on the verge of asking. It could be a sore point, even after all this time. Yet time was passing for them as well. So much of their short lives had been spent without her, especially young Cedric’s.

‘Very well,’ said the Doctor. ‘Let me think. It was 1938...’

* * *

It was 1938. Your mother and I had been working for... well, I’m not sure I want to get you into trouble when you get home, and while the organisation doesn’t exist anymore, it’s still top secret that it ever did. Let’s just say we worked for the League of Nations and leave it at that. Now, you must understand that this wasn’t the period in which we met. However, the Ship had been badly damaged and I was unable to repair it, not with the rather primitive materials at my disposal. So we made the best of a bad lot and offered our services to an organisation

that was looking out for the safety of the world. Your mother had both medical and intelligence training, while I offered my scientific expertise.

Now, we usually worked together on our little missions, but in this case I had been holed up in my laboratory examining some unusual debris that had been recovered on the South Coast, while your mother had been in the field on a separate mission. Now, now, as I said, this was all top secret. Maybe I'll tell you about it next time.

It was a Wednesday afternoon when she returned from her assignment, bursting into my laboratory. No one else would have dared just barge in like that, not even our commanding officer. Your mother, though, I wouldn't dare stand in her way. I leapt up... well, I looked up, and asked her how it had gone.

'Very well, thank you darling,' she replied, 'but it will be my last field mission for a while.'

'Whatever for?' I asked. Now I most certainly stood up. 'I can't be expected to go on missions without you. I'd simply refuse.' I admit, I was teasing her a bit there, as I had been a little miffed to be left behind this time.

'Well, I have the most wonderful news...'

* * *

'What was the news, Father?' asked Jilly, excitedly.

'What do you think, my dear? It was you.'

* * *

From the diary of Mrs Joan Smith –13th June, 1938:

During those past months, I have found myself looking back a great deal, particularly to the beginning of this chapter of our lives. The day when the Doctor, who I thought I had known so well, was suddenly taken from me, and another man arrived in his place. He explained to me that the transformation was the only way for him to survive the injuries he had

suffered in our latest misadventure, and that it would allow us to escape from those that were pursuing us. If only that last part had been true.

It didn't matter. The man I knew – my companion, my mentor – was gone, and instead I was left with a stranger. Everything about him was different – his face, his voice, his age. I could see nothing of my friend in the man who had replaced him. To make matters worse, his transformation had altered him so much that it had damaged his link with what I still thought of as his miraculous cabinet, so that he was unable to effect repairs after it was crippled in our final confrontation with our enemies. Irrational though it was, I found myself blaming this new Doctor for our predicament, although it had been my *Doctor, of course, who had made the choice.*

There was nothing left for us to do but make the best of a bad situation, and settle down in a time not our own – not that the Doctor could ever be said to be of any one time. This new character declared he would go by the name John Smith*, to better fit in with society's mores, and I couldn't help but see him as quite separate from the Doctor.*

Over time, though, I found myself drawn to John more and more. He was a gentler, more affectionate, more sensitive man than the often rather brusque Doctor I knew. At the same time, I began to recognise my Doctor in this new man – his passion for adventure, his eccentricity, his joy at discovery, not to mention his quite ridiculous dress sense. I began to fall for John, even as I began to see the Doctor looking back through his eyes. I was quite unprepared, however, to discover that he had fallen for me in turn.

* * *

'What is the meaning of this?' demanded Colonel Stephens, as I barged into his room. His faced puffed up in annoyance, bristling his moustache at me.

'Oh, do calm down, Colonel,' I said, bristling my own, far more impressive moustache at him. Yes, I've always been on point with my personal grooming, you know. Distinguished facial hair can make all the difference in stamping one's authority on a situation.

'I'm just here to speak to you about my wife,' I told him, sitting down opposite him without waiting for permission.

‘Ah, I see,’ said the Colonel, his demeanour relaxing. ‘I take it she’s has told you her news.’

‘You already knew?’ I asked, rather put out.

‘Well, I am her commanding officer, I rather need to be informed of these things. The CMO told me when the mission returned. So, what can I do for you and Lieutenant Smith?’

Oh, yes. You see, your mother had officially been recruited from the Women’s Transport Service, what used to be the FANYs. Now, stop sniggering, Cedric. Technically we were working as part of the British Army under League instruction, but its people were brought in from all over.

‘I want your assurance that Joan will be placed in no danger during the pregnancy. I will of course place myself at your disposal as always, but I must insist that my wife remains safe.’

‘Doctor, I have already removed her from field duty. If I could, I’d remove her from active duty altogether, but in the current climate of both global and extraglobal tension, I have orders to keep all my most valuable staff to hand.’

‘Surely that’s not –’

‘Doctor, you’re fortunate that I allow you and your wife to work together at all. Such an arrangement is highly irregular. It’s only because of both of your unique experience and qualifications that I continue to grant you such leeway, including the use of funds and resources to conduct your own experiments.’

‘Well, yes. I suppose you’re being quite reasonable,’ I accepted.

‘Not to mention your rejection of any kind of formal rank or commission, your refusal to wear uniform and your continued abuse of the tea facilities.’ I could see he was getting riled up again, but he breathed out slowly, as if deflating, and this seemed to calm him. ‘Doctor, I will of course do everything I can to take care of Joan. Do you really think, though, that if she really sets herself to a task, I could do anything to stop her? She’s worse than you.’

I had to admit, he had a point.

‘Now, as you’re here, perhaps you could appraise me of your

progress with the debris,' said the Colonel.

'Well, there's very little to go on so far,' I admitted. 'It's clearly extraterrestrial, seemingly a cast-off from a spacecraft, but as to its original function, I'm uncertain. At first glance it appears to be a communications device or transmitter, but there's more to it than that. In any case, it's quite non-functional, and heavily damaged. I'll keep tinkering, of course, but unless the field teams find anything else, I doubt I'm going to make much more of it.'

'Very well,' said the Colonel. 'I'll expect your full report in the morning. Dismissed.'

* * *

'So, aside from your mother being largely desk-bound, which she most decidedly did not enjoy, it was business as usual from then on. That little pile of machinery sat in a cardboard box in my laboratory, while I found more important things to be spending my time on. Recently I'd been working on trying to fix the Ship, my usual pastime.'

* * *

From the diary of Mrs Joan Smith – 28th February, 1939:

There's one thought that I've been unable to shake over the last few years. I've caught up with myself, living again through my own lifetime. I'm out there, somewhere – young, naïve, just beginning to make my way in the world. She – that other me – hasn't even met the Doctor yet. She has no inkling of the wonderful and terrible things she'll see in her life. As soon as we got stuck here, John gave me a stern talking to about the sanctity of time, and how we must never contact our earlier selves. I can't help but wonder, though: What would I tell her, if I could speak to her?'

'The man is infuriating, though! Sometimes, I truly believe that he's worse than the old one! Here I am, deskbound thanks to my condition, and yet still working all day on medical duty and all evening writing up reports. All the while, where is he? In that infernal machine of his, playing like a boy with his building blocks. I let it go as best I can, allow him his tinkering for the pleasure it brings him, but it exasperates me.

I fear I will never understand his obsession with it. His endless quest to get the thing moving again, using whatever spare parts he can find, knowing full well that they won't suffice. All so he can get back out there, hopping from place to place, time to time. After all this time, why can he not accept what our lives have become, the way I have? Is being here, with me, with this miracle on the way, not enough for him? Must he have history and the heavens as well?

* * *

I heard the Ship doors open, although I didn't see anything, busy as I was beneath the console, my own head buried deep within its innards. It wasn't quite like this back then. It was more studio-like, lots of lovely wood and brass, but always a bit of a mess as I was fiddling with it. I was down to my shirt, sleeves rolled up – I tended to wear a rather spiffing sky blue morning suit while working back then, but it was a little restrictive when arms deep in time circuitry.

'Hello there?' I said, although it was rendered to little more than a mumble, due to the hyperspanner in my mouth.

'Hello, darling,' came the reply. It was your mother of course – who could naturally understand my most muffled mumblings by this point.

I slid out from under the console and looked up her. She was quite used to speaking to me while I was on the floor or upside-down somewhere by this point.

'Hello, dear!' I said, beaming. 'Everything alright, I hope?'

'Oh, just fine,' she reassured me, absently touching her belly. We were now more than eight months into the pregnancy, and I deeply into the worrying stage.

I clambered to my feet and gently embraced her, my hands on her arms and my face close to hers. Oh, Cedric, stop pulling faces. She truly was beautiful, your mother, and never more so than then.

'To what, then, do I owe this unexpected visit?' I asked.

'It's six o'clock,' she said. 'I'm heading home for the evening. Are you coming, or are you going to tinker with this contraption all

night?'

We'd been set up with staff quarters at the base, although I stayed in the Ship just as often as not. Lately, though, I wanted to be home to keep an eye on your mother. She could clearly see this thought playing across my face, as she quickly added: 'It's quite alright if you do want to stay. I'm absolutely fine. Although if I don't put my feet up soon my ankles may never be the same again.'

'Are you certain?' I asked. 'It's just that I've finally made some headway with the space-time telegraph and –'

'Darling, it's fine, really. I've got the CMO and the girls from the WTS checking in on me what seems to be every five minutes. One evening without you won't do me any mischief.' She looked past me to the console. 'Is that light meant to be blinking?'

I snapped round to see a red bulb flickering urgently on the unit. It was one that had not activated in some considerable time, but I recognised it immediately.

'Contact!' I exclaimed. I frantically began to work the Ship's systems, trying to pinpoint and respond to the signal we had detected, but alas, it was gone too soon.

'What was that all about?' asked your mother.

'I'm cannot say where or how,' I replied, 'but there was, ever so briefly, a signal from another time capsule.'

'Good lord!' exclaimed your mother. 'You mean to say, one of your... superiors?'

'Perhaps,' I mumbled, trying not to sound to worried. 'Or something else entirely.'

'Oh, good grief, it's not the other you, is it? He'll be in London right now, won't he? You haven't got... crossed wires or something?'

I was pleased that she had developed a good grasp of the pernickety peculiarities of time travel, but I was quick to prove her wrong.

'Don't worry, my dear. I've ensured that the Ship won't register any kind of signal coming from itself. In fact, I'd already ensured that, over at Bruce, Brae and Bute. I'm sure you remember what a secretive

sort I was, and it wouldn't have done to have future versions of myself interfering with my affairs.' I looked closely at the readings on the control panel. 'That's odd... there's another signal buried in there too...'

It was then we heard the strange noise emanating from outside the Ship – a muffled scraping and beeping. Dashing out, we followed the sound to the corner of my laboratory, where, in a cardboard box on a shelf, beneath several textbooks, a pipette and a pie tin, the alien wreckage we had recovered had inexplicably activated itself.

I extricated the box from the bric-a-brac and hefted it onto my worktop. We cautiously peered inside. The machinery, which had previously been smashed apart in some places and melted together in others, was twisting, rotating, stretching and rejoining before our very eyes.

'It's... repairing itself,' gasped your mother. 'As if it were alive.'

* * *

'It was alive?!' gasped Cedric, sitting bolt upright in bed, his gradual slide into slumber interrupted.

'In a sense,' replied the Doctor. 'There was investigating to be done, of course, experimentation, but yes, I came to the conclusion that the mechanism was indeed alive, in its own way.'

'What was it?' asked Jilly, now thoroughly absorbed into the tale.

* * *

The machinery was reworking itself as we watched, the mangled parts reforming to functionality. Within minutes, it had taken a form that looked like nothing less than a mechanical woodlouse, its segments glinting in the lights of the laboratory. Three thin antennae protruded from the front, extending as it twitched on the surface of the desk.

'Fascinating,' I muttered to myself.

‘What on Earth is it?’ asked your mother.

‘Nothing on Earth,’ I replied.

‘Well, quite,’ she agreed, peering closer. ‘I’m certain none of the world powers have come up with anything like this, or I’m quite sure we’d have found out about it.’

Fortunately, I still had in my hand my winklegruber from my Ship repairs, the very thing to probe this strange object. I pointed the gruber at the fidgeting mechanism – which suddenly extended a segmented tail like a piston, catapulting itself from the surface and directly at me. I had just enough time to register the array of tiny, crustacean legs that had sprouted from its underside as it flew towards my face.

Fortunately, my lady wife reacted with impressive speed. I registered a loud clang as the thing was propelled from my face, leaving bloody scratches on my cheeks. As my shock abated, I registered her holding a Bunsen burner by its (thankfully cold and recently unused) spout.

‘Thank you, my dear,’ I said, ‘what would I do without you?’

The mechanical critter had landed on its back in the corner of the room, and lie there, somewhat dented, legs twitching. Your mother quickly moved to investigate it.

‘Now, best not Joan, it might still be dangerous,’ I warned her.

‘For goodness’ sake John, I’m not an invalid. Also, I am armed,’ she pointed out, wielding the Bunsen aggressively.

The machine stopped its wriggling, and instead extended its, now somewhat bent, antennae further. A sharp whirring sounded, not through the air and into my ears, but somehow bypassing that route altogether and arriving directly inside my head. It was distinctly unpleasant. I found my movements becoming sluggish as the noise increased in intensity. Your mother stood there, head in her hands, backing away unsteadily. Using all my willpower, I forced my legs to move, and took hold of her, steadying her. I extended the gruber and activated it, pushing its emission beyond the normal maximum before the sound in my head overtook my ability to do even that.

The sound reached a painful crescendo, then cut out. The alien

mechanism sat there, inert.

‘Are you alright, my dear?’ I asked your mother.

‘I… I think so,’ she said, looking frightfully dazed. ‘I just need to sit down.’

I helped her back to the Ship, reasoning that it was the safest place for both of us. When I was satisfied that she hadn’t been harmed, I returned to the lab to see what had become of the machine. Alas, when I arrived, there it wasn’t.

* * *

‘“There it wasn’t?”’ repeated Cedric, screwing up his face.

‘Indeed,’ replied the Doctor.

‘Was mother all right?’ asked Jilly, in a concerned tone.

‘She was fine,’ the Doctor reassured her. ‘Just a little shaken up. Still, I made sure she took it easy for a while… well, I tried.’

* * *

The Bunsen burner came in handy, even if it was a bit dinged-up following the altercation with the machine creature. Just the thing for boiling up a pot of tea in an emergency. I sat with your mother in the laboratory, sharing a pot as we recovered from the ordeal.

‘Doctor, what was that?’ she asked me, between sips. She tended to revert to calling me *Doctor* when she needed my expertise on the otherworldly.

‘I’m not certain,’ I admitted, ‘but I think I was almost right when I deduced it was a transmitter of some sort. Only it’s not for communication – it’s for control. Whatever waves it was transmitted were directed not at a simple receiver, but directly into our brains. I fear that if it had been undamaged and at full power, it might have overcome our will completely. As it was, it was merely able to briefly incapacitate us.’

‘Waves? As in, radio waves?’

‘A wave somewhere on the electromagnetic spectrum. Yes, let’s call it radio, only radio of a frequency that even Earth’s most sophisticated receivers could not detect.’

‘But that the human brain can?’ asked your mother, looking quite nauseated by the idea – unless it was just the Bunsen burner tea. ‘Not just the brain, though – the Ship picked up the signal before the… the machine thing did.’

‘Indeed,’ I said, perturbed. ‘That’s the most worrying part of this. The temporal signal was synced with this, ah, brain radio. Which suggests something very concerning indeed…’

After our tea, I bid your mother goodnight, and once I was sure she was going straight to bed, I returned to the Ship. However, it was not the ongoing repair work I was interested in now. No, this time I needed parts from the Ship’s communications array. It was time to build my own receiver.

The next day, I sat again in Colonel Stephens’s office, recounting the previous evening’s events.

‘You let it get away?’ he snapped, aghast.

‘I didn’t *let* it do anything,’ I snapped back. ‘It got away while I was focusing on helping my very pregnant wife recover from a traumatic mental attack.’

‘Well…’ the Colonel had the good grace to look ashamed. ‘Quite right, or course. How is she?’

‘She’s all right,’ I sighed, ‘although she insisted on going back to work this morning. She’s manning the receiver I built last night to detect the, um, brain waves.’

‘Brain waves?’ queried the Colonel.

I sighed. ‘It was either that or “brain radio”. Oh, I don’t know… “psychowaves”? Whatever we’re calling them, the mechanism was able to both respond to and emit them. It sat there for months, damaged and dormant, until it was triggered by the signal I detected. Then, at close range, it was able use its own transmissions to influence our own brains.’

Colonel Stephens looked genuinely disturbed.

‘That’s – that’s horrifying! That our own minds could be influenced by enemy agents. To what end are they working? Invasion?’

‘I fear that is the case,’ I said, sighing. ‘There are any number of extraterrestrial powers in this galaxy who would view the Earth as a prime piece of real estate. A bit of a handyman’s special, a lot of work to be done to bring it up to the standard they’re used to, but with a method of controlling human minds, well, they’d have all the manpower they need.’

‘You say you’ve found a way to detect these, ah, brain waves?’ asked the Colonel, visibly shaken by the threat.

‘Oh, it was simply a matter of isolating the right frequency. Once I knew it was out there, I just had to search for it.’ What I kept to myself was that it was the temporal signal, to which the Ship was already attuned, that allowed me to isolate the synchronised alien radio signal. I feared that, were I to inform him that yet another unearthly force was involved, immeasurably more advanced, he might simply keel over on the spot.

‘Now,’ I continued, ‘our little mechanical friend was clearly damaged when it was dropped to Earth. However, there are doubtless many, many more. If they’re receiving signals again, it suggests that they are due to be activated *en masse*.’

‘Ready to begin controlling our minds,’ gasped the Colonel.

‘I’m afraid so. However, these mechanisms also produce signals, which will allow us to track them down – and, with a little work, to produce a countersignal to stop their influence. Now,’ I said, getting to my feet, ‘if you’ll excuse me, I have a great deal of work to do.’

* * *

‘I settled down to a long night of complicated work on the Ship’s space-time telegraph, which was the key to detecting, and, I hoped, fighting these signals. I stopped by to check on your mother, expecting that she was getting a good night’s sleep. Of course, I should have known better – she was already working through my notes to see if she could apply her own field experience to the problem.’

‘Mother had worked on something like this before?’ asked Jilly.

‘Oh, your mother had experience in all sorts of fields even before we started working for the League of Nations concern. She might have been off field duty now, but I couldn’t keep her from working when there was a problem to solve. I dragged my oscilloscope and the space-time telegraph into the barracks so that we could at least work together in comfort. Of course, I had to make the tea. How times had changed...’

* * *

‘Doctor, please just explain what it does,’ sighed an exasperated Colonel.

‘It’s like a radio, sir,’ interrupted your mother. ‘Only it’s attuned to emit waves at the same frequency as these brain waves the aliens use. The Doctor adapted it from his space-time telegraph.’

‘His what?’ asked the Colonel, the explanation already escaping him.

‘Never mind,’ said your mother, waving her hands. I was impressed that she was able to get away with not only dismissing a question from her superior, but doing so while sitting in the only comfortable armchair in the complex. She even had her feet up on a stool.

‘The point is, the Doctor was able to rig up a device to emit the same kinds of signals that the aliens are sending.’

‘The tricky part is, we have no way of decoding their programming language,’ I added eager to join in. ‘Not with any alacrity, at least.’

‘I’ve been keeping up with recent developments in communications,’ your mother continued, not including the fact that she was actually recalling information released several years in the future. ‘In the last couple of years, a chap in America has come up with a way of cancelling noise, by changing the polarity of a speaker. Sound is a wave too, you see. Well, I thought, we don’t have to know how to speak the language if we can just cancel out the original

signal. We just need to reverse the polarity.'

'An ingenious idea,' I added, beaming with pride. 'I'm certain that I was just about to think of it.' I continued quickly, catching the look on your mother's face, 'I've rigged up a walkie-talkie to emit the reverse signal.' I gestured at the bulky backpack that lay on the desk, antenna at the ready. 'Given time, I'm sure I could come up with something more portable, but I'm afraid time is something we don't have.'

'Excellent work,' said Stephens, nodding curtly. 'We've received word from the Lisbon Observatory that an unidentified mass has been observed breaking Earth's orbital path and heading inwards. The information has been sent on to Aldershot, and the boys there are monitoring the skies for anything unusual.'

'No doubt the aliens' mother-ship on its way,' I observed. 'They've completed a tight orbit since they sent their little gizmos down, and now they're on their way to land themselves.'

Stephens gave a curt farewell and turned on his heel. I sat and began to inspect the anti-wave device with my trusty winklegruber.

'A few final tests?' I suggested. 'We don't want any hiccoughs.'

Your mother agreed, and began monitoring the output on the O-Scope.

* * *

From the diary of Mrs Joan Smith – 1st March, 1939:

There are times when I look at John, and I see my husband, the man I have devoted myself to above everything, even my country. The father of my child. There are other times that I look at him, and I see someone scarcely more than a child himself, content to play with his Ship as if it were no more than an enormous Meccano set, rather than a miracle from another world and age.

Then, there are other times, where I look at him and see the Doctor: the strange and mysterious being I once worked for, about whom, even after all this time, I still know so little. We talk of the old days at Bruce, Brae and Bute from time to time, when we can be sure no one else is

listening, yet when I steer the conversation towards his earlier life, he rapidly changes the subject, or simply falls silent. What was his childhood like, I wonder? Will he recount his youthful adventures to our child, or remain as tight-lipped as he is with me? How long ago was it, and just how much has he changed?

Yet I must ask myself the same questions. My childhood feels as though it was another life entirely, even as it sometimes seemed within grasping distance as I live through these decades again. How much, then, have I changed? From the young woman, scarcely more than a girl herself, who took up the role of assistant to the Doctor in the service of one who I still can only think of as 'Auntie,' to who I am now, having seen and learned and lost so much. To become one who treats the alien, the unknowable, if not as everyday, then quite simply as another fact of life to be dealt with. One who has lost so much patience with authority, yet follows her given role, doing my part even as I have knowledge that could change everything for my country.

Am I more like the person I once was – or more like the Doctor?

* * *

It was the early hours of the morning when I was awoken, having fallen asleep at the desk not long after I had persuaded your mother to go to bed. A private stood at the door, impatiently calling my name.

'Doctor! Colonel Stephens orders you to report to him immediately. Aldershot has reported the alien mass is entering sub-orbital altitude. They're landing, sir.'

'What?' I leapt to my feet. 'Why did no one tell me?' I switched on the detector, the signal immediately registering on the O-Scope. I uncomfortably manhandled the walkie-talkie onto my back, quite distressing my suit, and ran to the Colonel's office.

'Do we know where it's landing?' I asked him, not standing on ceremony.

'I've just been informed,' he answered. 'It's vanished from the radio detection system, but he trajectory suggests less than fifteen miles away, middle of the countryside.'

‘They obviously want to avoid being seen, at least until they know their plan is working. Some kind of camouflage technology. I should be able to use this to narrow it down.’

We paced quickly to the main entrance to take a car to the location, only to be greeted by our own men, standing glassy-eyed and blank-faced in front of us. The now familiar smothering pain of the brainwaves hit me, and I saw the Colonel drop to his knees, his head in his hands.

Desperately, I grabbed the emitter I’d wired into the walkie-talkie, trailing by a thin cable, and activated the machine. Immediately it sent out its own signal; silent, yet tangible in its power. Within seconds, the pain in my own mind abated. I pointed it at the Colonel, and he staggered back to his feet.

The troops began to advance on us, those who were armed brandishing their weapons in our direction. I turned the emitter on them. It took a little longer, and for a moment I was worried the machine had given out, but before long, they were all staggering backwards, clutching and shaking their heads. From within their ranks, a small, silver shaped slipped out and tried to escape.

‘Oh no you don’t, you little rascal!’ I turned the emitter on the mechanical creature. It screeched to a halt, before exploding in a hail of sparks.

‘That’s dealt with that little monster,’ I said to myself, rather satisfied. ‘Colonel, are you all right?’

Stephens looked dazed, but was gathering his wits quickly.

‘Yes, Doctor, I think so. So that was your mind-controller?’

‘Indeed. I’m glad to see you’re mostly recovered, but the rest of the men still seem impaired. They were exposed for longer, and fully under its control. I’m not sure they’ll be ready to follow us for some time.’

‘Not to worry,’ said the Colonel, resolutely. ‘It’ll take more than some metal prawn to bother me. I’ll drive, if you can direct me to the landing site.’

‘Excellent idea,’ I said, as we clambered into an ORV. ‘Only there will be rather more than a few metallic crustacea to deal with.’

‘Indeed. I’ll radio for back-up to meet us there.’

* * *

From the diary of Mrs Joan Smith – 1st March, 1939:

‘The reports came in over the next few days. Naturally, I had rather more pressing things on my mind, but as I gradually returned to the fold, I became aware of just how close we came to a takeover. Reports came in from military and police units across England, telling of sudden gaps in awareness and memory, with men finding themselves inexplicably in new locations, often in formation and armed, having lost minutes to hours. Had it not been for the Doctor and Colonel Stephens – as well as my own contribution, I may add – then this country, perhaps this world, might have fallen under the sway of these Radio-Men.’

* * *

We arrived at the landing site to see it rapidly filling with uniformed lines of figures, their bulky, silver suits reflecting the sunshine as they marched incongruously into the English countryside. Even from our vantage point we could see they stood a good seven feet tall, their reflective silver suits topped by bulbous glass helmets. From each bulb sprang a thick, black cable, connecting at the sides roughly parallel to the wearer’s temples, looping over the top where it passed through a silver cap, topped by a single antenna. The wearers, all seemingly men, were expressionless, their eyes obscured by thick goggles.

‘Those antennae must act as receivers for the brain waves,’ I said to the Colonel, ‘and the cables must amplify them in some way. That’s how they’re able to stay in contact away from the mother-ship, receiving instructions.’

‘With the waves controlling their minds,’ he added, shuddering.

‘They may not need to be fully controlled,’ I considered, ‘not if they’ve been conditioned to obey commands. Still, with all those signals flooding their brains, I doubt they have much room for original thought. Rather a good idea, eh, Colonel? You’d never need to worry about men getting the misunderstanding a command or making a rash

decision. Just send out the instructions and watch them all march along.'

'I don't care for your insinuation, Doctor,' growled the Colonel. 'We value intelligence and initiative in this operation.'

'Here it goes then.' I stepped out of the vehicle, slipping the walkie-talkie back on. 'Excuse me, sirs? Good morning!'

The closest of the Radio-Men (a charming name your mother coined) turned to face me. He remained expressionless, and yet, his tinny voice, though robotic, betrayed what seemed like surprise.

'You should not be here,' he intoned. 'You should not be aware of us. You are... military? You should be subsumed.'

'Well, you would like us to be, I realise. However, we've already found a way to disrupt your little trick, so I suggest you all get back in your ship and rethink it.

The Radio-Man raised his right hand. In his palm was a flat disc, rather like the lens of a torch.

'We have other methods,' he droned. The disc began to glow.

Quickly, I activated the emitter. Instantly, the Radio-Men buckled, clasping at their own bulbous headwear. The one closest to me flailed his arms, loosing a blast of energy at an askew angle. It made contact with one of his comrades, felling him.

'*Retreat!*' buzzed another of the invaders – it was impossible to say which one. Two of them grasped their felled brother by his arms and dragged him with them. They walked unsteadily, staggering and zig-zagging as they slowly made their way back. A shimmer in the middle distance revealed the vague outline of a vast, hemispherical object, into which they disappeared, one by one. Once the last of them had managed to steer himself into the ship, it shimmered away again, but the sudden noise and force of its take-off knocked me down.

Colonel Stephens rushed to my side.

'That was a damned fool thing to do, Doctor!'

'Oh, it worked, didn't it?' I brushed it off. 'You can cancel the back-up, Colonel. I do think we should be getting back to base though.'

* * *

‘Did you really beat all the Radio-Men?’ gasped Cedric, excited again.

‘Well, that small number,’ smiled the Doctor. ‘There were far more, though, on the mother-ship.’

‘That wasn’t the mother-ship?’ asked Jilly.

‘Oh, not at all, the mother-ship would have been much larger. That was merely the advance force, there to relay the orders to the little gizmos and follow up as a landing party.’

‘What about the gizmoles?’ asked Cedric. Jilly rolled her eyes at his mispronunciation.

‘We didn’t get the whole picture for some time, but reports were already being received of their taking over tactically important groups. The advance force was giving them their orders, though; once I’d disrupted their ability to transmit and receive brainwaves, the little nasties went dormant. It would only be a short-term solution, of course.’

* * *

I returned to my laboratory to find a stranger stood there. With deathly white skin and sunken eyes, he looked like he hadn’t seen the sun in some time. He was dressed simply, all in black, a cloak covering his shoulders and hiding his hands.

‘Good afternoon,’ I said politely, while alert for any move on his part. ‘How can I help you?’

‘Good day, Doctor,’ said the stranger. ‘It is the Doctor, isn’t it? I’ve read up on the various agents and renegades who have been active in this region of space-time. Only you and one other are still unaccounted for, and frankly you’re looking far too together to be the other chap.’

‘Ah,’ I muttered, accepting the unpalatable truth of this person’s identity. ‘So it was your temporal signal I detected the other night.

Synched to the brain waves that have been flooding this planet.'

'Brain waves?' chuckled the stranger. 'Oh, that's rather good. Very quaint. Yes, as you've surmised, I have been involved in the propagation of these "brain waves". As you have been involved in their disruption.'

'A may have had a little hand in it,' I admitted, unable to suppress a slightly smug smirk.

'Well, no one else on this planet could have worked out how to detect them,' said the stranger, 'and once I realised I was looking for one of us, it was simple enough to home in on your Ship. I must ask, though, Doctor, why bother? Once I would have assumed you had orders contrary to mine, but you're no longer working in any official capacity. So what does it benefit you to disrupt my allies' plans?'

'Your allies?' I queried. 'Those little mechanical nuisances and their creators?'

'Oh, *creators* might be furnishing them with a little too much credit. While they had developed a simplistic version of the probes, the strategically useful version is largely my own work.'

'I see. So what are you? A mechanic? A technician for hire?'

The stranger baulked at this, but remained composed.

'An Agent of Unity,' he explained. 'A specialist. Think of me as... a scientific advisor.' His face took on a firmer, more aggressive expression. 'I have answered your question, now answer mine. Why are you interfering with my allies' intentions?'

'Because the Earth's history has already been set, and this does not figure into it. Because there are millions of innocent people on this planet, and I will not stand by and let them needlessly suffer and lose their freedom. Because... because this is my home, and I will defend it.'

The Advisor, as I now thought of him, shook his head in confusion and distaste, as if my thinking was simply too alien for him to understand.

'If nothing else, I stopped those things because no one should experience their dominance. I was on the receiving end of one your

little creations' attacks, as was... someone I care about. It wasn't a simple hypnotic trance; it was a brutal assault on the mind.'

'Walk with me,' he said. As he didn't appear to pose any threat presently, I followed. He led me out to the main courtyard of the complex, where there stood a line of small wooden units. Yesterday there had been three of them; today there were four.

'Your Ship,' I remarked, perhaps unnecessarily.

The Advisor nodded, reaching into the folds of his cloak and retrieving an ornate key.

We soon stood in the control room, all stark white lines and form following function. No style, no atmosphere at all. The Advisor looked at me, perplexed.

'Why are you still here? Your organisation may no longer hold the influence it once had, but you still have plenty of allies back home. Unless you've finally seen the light and decided to join our side?'

'Join Unity? I wouldn't give your lot the time of day. Your constant meddling in the history of other worlds is unconscionable.'

The Advisor scoffed loudly at this.

'Unlike you? I've read your file, Doctor, and that of this planet. You are most certainly not content to sit and observe. Your fingerprints are all over the history books of the Earth.'

I had to admit to myself that he had a point there. I do tend to get a little involved. Not that I was going to let him win the argument there.

'My fingers may be smudged with the ink of history books, but at least they are free of blood,' I rejoindered. 'How can you possibly justify helping these machine people in their conquest of this world? Aside from threatening the entire history of this part of the galaxy, they can't control everyone with their little toys. There will be violence; the loss of life will be incalculable.'

The Advisor looked almost as impassively as one of his mechanised friends.

'The New Agents of Unity work towards just that – the unity of

intelligent life across the galaxy. We are not content to wait for these squabbling peoples to find common ground. Sometimes long-term peace can only be achieved through short-term conflict. In the grand scheme of things, we will be preventing bloodshed. Why, this planet is gearing up for the greatest war in its history! All that will be prevented, when we give rise to a new, unified human race.'

'Unified under the control of these mechanical men, without even the freedom of their own thoughts? I won't have it.'

I stepped closer to the Advisor, my nose mere inches from his. He stared back at me, unmoved.

'You have little choice, Doctor. I've been meaning to ask – why did the signal affect you so strongly? Your brain should have been all but impervious to waves programmed for humans.'

I found it difficult to answer in that moment.

'Have you been messing around with your biology, Doctor?' The Advisor's emotionless face finally cracked into a sneer. 'What was it – a disguise? A mistake? Are you trapped like this, Doctor?'

I sighed, for I could not deny it.

'One thing to consider: my allies are on the forefront of bodily engineering. Their future will be one of biological mastery. If anyone can fix your little problem, it's them.' He stepped away, engaging his Ship's controls. 'Something to ponder as you leave.'

He opened the door, and dismissed me with a wave of his hand.

Normally, of course, I wouldn't have stood such impertinence. In that instance, though, as the Advisor's Ship disappeared and I stood, holding the key I had picked from his pocket, I was content to simply smile to myself.

* * *

'A key?' piped up Cedric. 'What did you want a key for?'

'A key to the baddie's Ship, silly,' said Jilly, rolling her eyes.

'But you already have a Ship,' said Cedric, waving his arms around, his right hand almost colliding with his sister's head.

‘You forget,’ said the Doctor, ‘that I still hadn’t managed to repair my Ship. So a way into the Advisor’s could prove very handy.’

‘So you could steal his?’ gasped Cedric.

‘Oh no,’ said the Doctor, shaking his head. ‘I wouldn’t steal a whole Ship. Well… anyway, the point is that I would never give up on *my* Ship. We’ve been together far too long. No, I realised that he’d come back looking for me soon, and there was something in his Ship that would be very useful indeed.’

‘What?’ asked the children in unison.

‘We’re getting ahead of ourselves. First we had to deal with the Radio-Men…’

* * *

‘Oh, thank heavens, you’re all right!’

I’d returned to find your mother in barracks, looking shaken.

‘Are you all right, my dear? You’re not normally so worried about me on a little mission.’

‘One of these days you’re not going to come back,’ she snapped. ‘Can you please think about us for a moment the next time you’re about to go charging off to face who-knows-what?’

I put my hands on she shoulders and held her gently.

‘It’s all right, my dear. I’m fine, and so are you, and so is the baby. Plus, I have this!’ I reached into my pocket and pulled out the key.

‘Your key. What of it?’

‘Not my key, my dear, but the key to another Ship! There’s another of my people here, working with those aliens.’ She looked suddenly alarmed again, but I reassured her. ‘No, don’t worry, there’s still no sign of *him*. Still, I don’t much like this chap. Nonetheless, he might turn out to be useful.’

‘What do you mean? Won’t he be coming back for his key?’

‘Oh, in time. He’ll have a duplicate, no doubt. For now he’ll be

busy trying to deal with his allies, who are bound to be rather upset that their plan didn't work. He's made me realise, though, that I have been a dolt! It's all to do with the Ship! I can wire the space-time telegraph back into the Ship and transmit the reverse signal directly to the mother-ship. That will scupper them good and proper, they'll have no choice to go back where they came from or they'll be unable to communicate with each other at all.'

'That's wonderful! Surely that will bring this other fellow back, though? He's not going to be happy, after all.'

'Oh, I'm counting on it. Now that I have his key, I can let myself into his Ship, and I know just what I need to get mine working again.' I beamed at her, terribly happy with myself. 'With a bit of luck, I could have the Ship up and running again by the end of the week! We can leave this time and go anywhere again!'

* * *

From the diary of Mrs Joan Smith – 1st March, 1939:

Just like that. I fear I may simply have boggled at him, lost for words. Of course, I knew that he had been working on the Ship for all this time, but in spite of his preoccupation with it, it always seemed to be something of a pipe dream. To hear him speak of escape, as I worked through the last days of my pregnancy, and with such elation... I confess that it stunned me.

He was, of course, oblivious.

* * *

I finished rewiring the telegraph back into the control console with a flourish. I brought out the scanning orrery and tuned it into the same signal. A glowing dot appeared between the orbits of Earth and Mars, pulsing with energy. The Radio-Men's mother-ship, containing unknown numbers of them.

I powered up the walkie-talkie and charged the reverse signal back through the space-time telegraph and the Ship's own, far more

powerful transmitters. Unable to resist, I picked up the microphone installed into the console.

'Hostile vessel, this is a message from the planet Earth. As you are no doubt now experiencing, we have secured a way to disrupt your communications. I will continue to increase the intensity of my transmission until you leave, or you lose all control of your command systems. I suggest you return to your own planet while you can still fly your ship. Good day to you.'

The pulsing dot on the orrery wobbled uncertainly, before moving slowly outwards, across the orbital paths of Jupiter, Saturn and so on, towards the outermost reaches of the Solar System. Finally, it reached the edge of the scanner's range, and winked out of existence.

I studied the telegraph's readings. As I suspected, a temporal signal appeared only moments after the alien ship had fled. He was coming back.

There was little time to lose. I knew the Advisor's Ship was likely to be exactly where he had last materialised it and in the same form, a standard method of saving computational power. Naturally, I was correct, and I found the extraneous hut where it had previously stood. I fished the Advisor's key from my pocket and inserted it into the lock. What appeared as a thin, wooden door outside opened inwards as a dense and heavy mechanism. I immediately dashed to the control console, not at all dissimilar to our own good Ship's. Just as I had hoped, the layout was almost identical, and I was able to quickly locate the Ship's interface module.

Now, that's a very important component of the Ship, Cedric, but not one I can fully explain in any less than a thirteen-hour lecture, so now really isn't the time. Suffice to say, it's absolutely vital for the safe transport of the Ship, and it could not be repaired with the technology available on twentieth-century Earth.

I yanked the module free and fled the Ship, locking it behind me, and ran back to my laboratory.

I was elated. Finally, escape from the Earth was in my grasp! I was even more delighted to see your mother there, sitting uncomfortably in one of the rickety wooden chairs that furnished the

lab.

'My dear I cried. 'I've got it! This is the key to finally fixing my link with the Ship and –'

'That's smashing, darling, but I think we need to – ooh – report to Colonel Stephens. He's been looking for you, and I really think must – aah…'

'My dear, are you alright?' I asked, forgetting the module and rushing to her side. I helped her up from the chair.

'No, I'm not sure I – oh my –'

Her knees buckled and she yelled in pain.

'John, it's happening!'

'It's happening? It's happening!' I slipped my arms under her and hefted her up. 'It's all right, my love. Let's get you to the infirmary. Everything will be fine.'

'I'm sure it will, darling, but please make it fine *quickly*!'

* * *

From the diary of Mrs Joan Smith – 3rd March, 1939:

While I wouldn't dream of admitting it to him, John may have been right when he warned me against overexerting myself. The birth came earlier than expected, and I was far less prepared than I would care to admit. After thirteen hours, *though, holding her in my arms, it was truly worth it. I don't think I'd ever truly accepted that I'd ever be here, holding my own child, after so long. Yet here she is, sleeping soundly as I write: my daughter, Jill Smith.*

While I could watch my husband hold her all night, I fear I must sleep as well.

* * *

After many hours of extraordinary pacing, I was finally allowed back into the infirmary ward. Your mother had never looked so beautiful as

she did then – nor so exhausted! – holding you in her arms. The first time I saw you, Jilly, swaddled in a blanket, the tiniest, most delicate little thing I had ever seen... for perhaps the first time in my life, I was lost for words. You were absolutely perfect.

I lost track of the time I spent there, watching you sleep, listening to you cry, simply staring at you as you took your first look at the world. Eventually, your mother slept, and I stood there, cradling you in my arms, content to look at you. The interface module sat heavily in my pocket, but I was barely aware of it. My preoccupation with the Ship was entirely forgotten. My world was in that room.

I couldn't say how long I stood there, content to hold you, before I was jolted from my happiness by a scream.

The door to the ward room burst open. The Advisor stood there, his once placid face contorted into a furious scowl. One of the nurses lay at his feet; thankfully, I could see she was still breathing, merely unconscious.

'A stun was sufficient to deal with her, Doctor, but I shall not hesitate to kill you.' He held a weapon, a stubby black blaster, perhaps taken from his alien allies. He seemed to suddenly register the child in my arms, lowering his weapon. 'So that's why you're so obsessed with this planet,' he said, looking at you and your mother. 'I had come here to remove you from this planet one way or another... but I will settle for the interface module and my key.' He raised the weapon again. 'One false move, though, Doctor, and I shall forget any such leniency.'

'Just take it,' I said, holding you in one arm and pulling the module and key from my pocket with my now free hand. 'Take it, and get out of here.'

I handed the devices to him. He grabbed them, slipping them into the folds of his cloak while keeping his weapon trained on us.

'Please,' I begged him. 'You have what you want. Just go.'

Colonel Stephens appeared at the door, his pistol trained on the Advisor. I could hear the boots of his men tramping down the corridor.

'Colonel, let him go,' I said, desperately. 'Even with back-up I

doubt you'll successfully hold him. Just let him go. His mission is over, and we're better off without him.'

The Colonel balked for a moment, then relented, lowering his weapon.

'Stand down, men,' he ordered. 'Let the agent pass.'

The Advisor, weapon still raised, positioned himself to face the both of us, and backed out of the room. I heard his rapid footsteps as he ran down the corridor and out into the courtyard. In mere moments, I could hear the telltale grind of his Ship dematerialising, and I finally relaxed.

I looked back at your mother. She was, mercifully, still sleeping.

'Would you explain to me why I just let an enemy of this country and this planet to go free?' snapped the Colonel.

'His allies are defeated, and he'll be recalled by his own people before long. I couldn't risk any firefight if he tried to escape from you, you must understand?'

The Colonel relaxed, and smiled at me, a singularly unnerving experience in itself.

'Of course, Doctor,' he said. 'How are your ladies doing?'

I looked at you in my arms, Jilly, and at your mother, and smiled back at him.

'They're perfect,' I replied.

* * *

'Weren't you upset?' asked Cedric. 'Now that you couldn't get your Ship to work?'

'Perhaps a little,' the Doctor admitted, 'but I knew then that I was where I was supposed to be. If I had only realised that earlier, perhaps things would have been simpler. It certainly wouldn't have put you both so at risk.'

Jilly looked thoughtful.

'Father,' she said after a moment, 'weren't you worried about

what the Advisor would have done if you'd left him on Earth with a broken Ship?'

'Well... I suppose I thought it wouldn't really have been my problem.' The Doctor looked suitably shamefaced. 'I wasn't always the responsible figure I am now, you know. Once upon a time, I could be quite reckless.'

'Father, will you tell us the story of how you did manage to fix the Ship?' asked Cedric. 'And about how *I* was born?'

A sadness came over the Doctor's face.

'A tale for another time, I feel, my lad,' he said, quietly. 'Time you got some sleep.'

* * *

Later, after Cedric had slipped off to sleep, the Doctor found Jilly in the control room, watching the stars through the dome of the ceiling as the Ship drifted through space-time.

'Are you alright, my dear?' asked the Doctor, a little awkwardly.

'I suppose so,' she replied, but her voice didn't agree with her words.

The Doctor sat down next to his daughter, and gently placed his hand on her shoulder.

'I'm afraid I made myself a little sad this evening, too,' he said to her, gently.

She turned to look up at him.

'If Mother's there in 1938, can't we...?'

'We can't,' he said quickly, cutting her off. 'This is why I was always so reluctant to talk to you about her. I knew you'd want me to take you back to see her. I'm very sorry, but it's something I simply cannot do.'

'I suppose it must be against the rules,' sighed Jilly, looking back up at the stars.

The Doctor opened his mouth, but couldn't think of the right

reply. Of course it was against the rules, he thought to himself, the same way sending a telegram to his younger self with a few tips for 1939 was against the rules. That didn't mean it was impossible, of course. The more questions he answered, the more she'd ask, he was sure, and eventually, he'd just have to admit that he couldn't bring himself to go back, just to lose Joan all over again.

He rummaged in the deep right pocket of his blue tunic.

'I'd like you to have this,' he said, passing her something. She looked back at him, and then down at his hand. He was holding a small book in deep red leather. Carefully, she took it. The cover was blank, but on the first page, in neat, professional handwriting, was the inscription: 'The Diary of Mrs Joan Smith.'

'Mother's diary?' gasped Jilly, her eyes wide.

'That's right,' said the Doctor. 'I'm not sure who she was writing it for. Her family, back in her own time, perhaps, or maybe just for herself. I read it often, to remind myself of her, and our adventures. It's time you had it. Time to know her through her own words, not just those of this old duffer.'

Jilly stood up, and embraced the Doctor in a powerful hug.

'Thank you, Father. Good night.'

The Doctor watched as she dashed down the corridor, back to her own room. She was growing up so quickly, he thought. They both were. Sooner or later, he'd have to make a decision about the sort of life they were going to live. He couldn't keep careening off through the cosmos, putting them in goodness-knows-what sort of danger. Then again, he couldn't keep dropping them off at school for a term, only to take longer and longer trips away without them, always returning on time but never *in time*. A terrible habit, stretching the Laws of Time like that. One day, of course, he might never come back; or worse yet, he might come back as someone else.

The longer the trips he took between seeing them, though, the longer it would be until he had to make that choice, and he wasn't ready to let them go. Not yet.

As the kind-eyed inventor disappeared, the Doctor found his own eyes pricking with tears. His wife had been a fine woman, and by now she must be long dead. How could he not mourn? He could feel Morbius exulting at such weakness, and for a moment he thought he might as well allow the dictator his victory.

What would it achieve for him to resist? His wife was gone. Who knew if his children or even grandchildren were alive? He had no memories to inform him either way.

A jowly figure took the screen now, his face stern but with smile lines around the eyes, a man of passionate extremes. Collar-length hair sat beneath a broad, soft-brimmed hat, and the Doctor knew that this – that he *– had been a man who saw a great deal and thought about it deeply. A man for whom intelligence and truth were paramount, and who had very little tolerance for liars and fools.*

The Doctor sighed and watched again, as this latest player strutted and fretted onto the stage.

THE COUNTRY OF THE YOUNG
by Philip Purser-Hallard

‘An absolute farrago,’ the Doctor declaimed on our return to London. ‘A futile fabrication. A concatenation of bunkum and balderdash. A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury and signifying a pointless waste, Miss Weston, of your precious time and my own.’

He slammed the side-door of the jeep and irritably waved the driver on his way. Having been subjected to the Doctor’s intemperate mood for the past sixty miles, the young man had little hesitation in obeying.

‘I’m not sure Wing Commander Jackson would appreciate being called an idiot,’ I reproved my employer, as I unlocked the offices of Bruce, Brae and Bute and let us both inside.

‘Nor would most idiots,’ the Doctor harrumphed. ‘Why anybody should have though that tissue of nonsense worth our while, I shall never know,’ he continued fulminating, as I went through to the tiny kitchen to boil the kettle for a cup of tea. ‘There was no mystery to the matter at all. I was promised lights in the sky, foo fighters, the ghost of Baron von Richtofen – heaven alone knows what. I’ve never come across such inconsequential rubbish.’

‘I suppose Major Miller’s family might consider his disappearance consequential,’ I reminded him quietly as the kettle boiled.

The Doctor tutted. ‘They’re hardly the only family bereaved by this latest turn in your absurd war. The incident has people excited because this conductor fellow was supposed to be famous and they haven’t found his body yet, that’s all. What did he expect when he got on a plane against orders and flew straight into the middle of the Luftwaffe’s air support for the largest German offensive for months?’

‘I don’t suppose he expected that part at all,’ I sighed. ‘And he was a bandleader, not a conductor.’

Privately, I agreed with the Doctor’s assessment of our recent investigation, if not his dismissal of Major Miller, whose music has been of comfort to so many during the War. When I got home I intended to ask Mrs Evans for the use of the gramophone and listen to ‘Moonlight Serenade’ with any other lodgers who cared to join me.

But popular culture has always been something of a blind spot for my employer.

I took him his tea, for which he thanked me with a scowl and a grunt. I turned to the small pile of correspondence and newspapers that had accumulated during our day's absence.

The Doctor lifted his teacup and held it steadily before him for a while, glaring out of the window at the passers-by, muffled up in their hats and overcoats against the December chill. Eventually, without having tasted a drop, he put it down again.

Pensively, he said, 'Miss Weston, did you get the impression that Jackson was reluctant to let us leave?'

I had, in fact. So pressing had Wing Commander Jackson been in his insistence that Miller's disappearance was an enigma worth the Doctor's investigation, that my employer had eventually stormed off the RAF base in a dudgeon, against his protests, and commandeered one of his jeeps to bring us all the way back to Portland Place. 'The Wing Commander felt the matter warranted a fuller report,' I reminded him.

'So he kept saying,' the Doctor reflected. 'You're quite right, though, the man wasn't an idiot. I saw him fill in the *Times* crossword in six minutes flat. I'd almost swear he had some other reason for keeping us there. Thank you for the tea,' he added, leaving it untouched as he stood and swept towards the stairs to his inner sanctum. 'You'll be so good as to excuse me for a while.'

A few moments later I heard the deranged screeching from upstairs that I now knew was connected with the workings of his inexplicable cabinet of miracles. I sighed and began methodically working through the day's news clippings.

* * *

When the Doctor returned a few hours later, he had changed his clothes, which always seemed to improve his mood. He now wore a dark green thigh-length tunic whose hems were traced with embroidery, cinched with a leather belt with a loop for a scabbard, over boots and leggings. He had donned a round cap too, which he removed with a sigh as he subsided into his usual chair. It creaked beneath his ursine bulk.

He took a sip of the tea and gave an appreciative sigh,

apparently not noticing that by now it was stone cold. Then he rumbled, 'Do you recall who first suggested that we should look into the business with this... jazz band fellow?'

I sighed. 'It was Auntie who drew your attention to it, I believe,' I said. Quite accurately, Auntie, as you will yourself recall.

'Indeed,' he agreed. 'And I wonder what it was that she hoped to distract me from, hmm? Tell me, Miss Weston, have you been keeping anything from me?'

I'm embarrassed to admit, Auntie, that I blushed – a fine cherry red that would have matched the Napoleonic War uniform I'd seen him wearing the previous week. 'I can't imagine what you mean, Doctor,' I told him weakly.

He sighed. With great patience he said, 'Miss Weston. Joan. You are my liaison with the British intelligence services, as embodied in the person we both refer to euphemistically as your aunt. I understand that serving two masters can be demanding, but it will become intolerable if you and I are unable to be honest with one another. What is it that your *other* employer sent me to Bedfordshire to keep me from finding out?'

Well, Auntie, you will understand that the game was up. It would do no good to persevere in a deception when I had already, as they say, been rumbled.

I passed him the double fold that I had already pocketed from that day's *Irish Times*. While he generally only looks at the articles that I have marked for him in each of the papers, there is no telling what other story might happen to catch his eye in passing. He spread the pages and scowled at them, willing them to surrender their secrets to his scrutiny, until I turned the sheet over for him and indicated the item in question.

'An announcement of an auction? In Dublin?' he frowned, and peered in at the smaller print beneath. 'Hmm. "The personal collection of the late poet and author Michael Robartes will be auctioned at the Howard Hotel on..." Yes, yes... "Disposal of his estate has been long delayed by legal disputes..." Indeed... Ah! "An acquaintance of William Butler Yeats, George William Russell and Lady Gregory, Mr Robartes was a minor figure in the Celtic Revival but a leading light in the mystical Order of the Alchemical Rose, of which he was co-founder." Good heavens. Miss Weston, you realise what this means?'

I am, of course, well acquainted with my employer's fascination

with matters of the occult and esoteric, given the rather personal dangers it has embroiled me in, on so many occasions, during the four years of our association. He is, apparently like the late Mr Robartes, an inveterate collector of objects and artifacts of supposed magical significance. Since he keeps them all upstairs in his impenetrable, apparently infinitely extensible, cabinet, I cannot imagine that his possessions will be available to be disposed of should he die.

I said, 'I assume that Auntie prefers to keep you here in London, where she can...,' I rejected the phrase *keep an eye on you*, substituting, '...call on your expertise when she requires it. Rather than having you haring off to Ireland on a whim and picking through some dead druid's leavings.'

The Doctor harrumphed again. 'That alone would hardly be worth such subterfuge. She hasn't required my services for months. Despite the Germans' flying bombs, the consensus is that this war of yours is going rather well for the Allied side, and we haven't seen any interference from other spheres for some time.'

I have quite often wished that the Doctor would refrain from referring so insistently to 'your war.' Despite his Scottish accent, I know that he does not consider himself a subject of the British Crown, and that when he says 'your' he refers to the Allied powers in general, or perhaps even to those on both sides. Nevertheless, it's rather difficult to avoid taking the term personally. The War is not *mine*, and as you know, I have reason to regret its ever having occurred. A little shortly, I said, 'So what's your explanation, Doctor?'

He blithely ignored my tone. 'It would surely be a matter of indifference to your superiors if I were to acquire some of Robartes's trinkets. The items mentioned in the paper are of purely historical value, in any case. But of course, any relic of moment, from a truly occult point of view, might well evade the eye of even an expert assayer.'

'Even so,' I protested. 'Why should Auntie object to you getting your hands on any ritual object you cared to acquire? Better you, surely, than someone hostile to our interests.' The Doctor may not, as he would be the first to point out, be on our side, but when he is persuaded to intervene it is generally to avoid what he considers an unnatural advantage accruing to any party in the War. His neutrality, like that of the Irish government, has on the whole been a benevolent one.

‘Quite so, Miss Weston. Better me than your country’s enemies. And correspondingly...?’ His eyes gleamed as he waited for my thinking to catch up with his own.

It did so. ‘And correspondingly better us, or our allies, than you.’

I continued as he gave me a satisfied smile. ‘So you think Auntie is sending agents to the auction to bid for some of the relics, and didn’t want you to find out about it. Could there be anything actually useful for sale?’

‘It’s obvious she believes so,’ he agreed. ‘And if it’s true, then agents of all sorts of powers may be there. Not all of them necessarily mundane,’ he added thoughtfully. ‘I can quite see why she wished to keep me away from Dublin. And, correspondingly, why I absolutely must be there.’

I checked the newsprint. ‘But the auction’s tomorrow!’ I considered our options. ‘The ferries are very unreliable these days, but I suppose if you took a train from Euston to Holyhead, you might strike lucky. Or perhaps you could charter a boat from there to Dublin. But it would be a close thing even so, and there’s the danger from U-boats.’ I wondered whether the Doctor even had a passport, and if so, to what nation it was registered.

‘Oh, I think we can do better than that.’ The Doctor beamed seraphically. ‘Besides, who said that I was going alone?’

* * *

The Doctor’s cabinet of wonders has barely changed since I first set foot inside it, that night during the Blitz when we were pursued by animated constructs in the shape of Hitler and the German High Command, as well as – for what seemed valid reasons at the time – assorted comedians and entertainers. Over the years it has merely become more crowded with alchemical bric-a-brac and the Tiffany lamps for which the Doctor has a surprising penchant. It remains somehow clean and untroubled by cobwebs – quite unlike the upstairs room where it stands, if I am not allowed to go up there with a feather duster once in a while.

I’ve never even seen any droppings or pellets from the owl that the Doctor inexplicably keeps in there. I still have no idea what the creature eats. Today it was perched high up in an upper arch, apparently asleep. As we entered, it opened its eyes sleepily and

murmured, ‘Who?’ and the Doctor cheerily replied, ‘Yes, it’s me.’

The owl has no name. I asked the Doctor once, and he replied, ‘Birds don’t use names,’ with such a puzzled frown that I felt unable to pursue the matter.

Now my employer busied himself about the archaic wooden mechanism in the centre of the room. I knew from one terrifying incident some years previously that the aspects of the cabinet he can control from there include, through some miracle that I am quite unequipped to understand, its location in the outside world. On that occasion he had us translocate to Antarctica, of all places, where we encountered a party of German explorers attempting to tunnel into the hollow centre of the Earth – and, worse by far, the creatures whom they awoke in the process. The Doctor was quick to assure me that no such horrors awaited us in Dublin.

‘A mere three hundred miles,’ he breezed, ‘and no movement along the fourth or fifth axes. Why, I have some seven-league boots about the place that would have us there in a few minutes, if it wasn’t for the question of the Irish Sea.’ He paused. ‘One of us, that is. I only have the single pair. Though I suppose if we linked arms and wore one each…’ He stared down thoughtfully at my feet, so much smaller than his.

‘I’m sure your first plan will do marvellously,’ I told him hurriedly. ‘Remember the sea.’

‘Yes, of course.’ He bustled about some more, pressing switches and whirling knobs. At one point he carefully repositioned a statue of some Hindu deity from one panel to another, and placed a large glass marble where it had been. Whether this represented some mystical part of the process or an aesthetic preference, I couldn’t guess.

We were surrounded by the same uncanny screeching that permeates the offices during the Doctor’s sulks, and the view of the London skyline through the high arched window darkened to a perfect starless night. Behind my back I crossed my fingers, hoping that when the view returned it would show the architecture of a different capital city, rather than green glaciers and mountains of ice.

‘Please don’t do that, Miss Weston,’ the Doctor told me without looking up. ‘It disrupts the feng shui.’

* * *

Happily, a few minutes later, we were stepping out of the cabinet into a book-lined nook lit by a generous window, which proved to be one tiny part of the most enormous library I had ever seen. Beneath a high ceiling, vaulted and panelled in warm dark wood, rank after rank of shelves retreated into the distance, crammed with leatherbound books and fronted by white marble busts. Wrought-iron staircases led up to where a second storey, with a balustrade, held as many volumes again. The character of the light from outside suggested roughly the same latitude, and the same overcast weather, that we had left behind in London.

'The Long Room,' the Doctor said with satisfaction. 'Part of the library at Trinity College. I was here when it was being built, you know.'

The building being over two hundred years old, I ignored his boast. It may indeed be the absolute truth, but asking him to elaborate only encourages him.

A nearby plinth held a wooden harp that I recognised as a symbol I had seen any number of times in Irish contexts, including on bottles of Guinness. 'The harp of the High King Brian Boru,' the Doctor noted, 'supposedly. It's actually no older than the fourteenth century. A splendid instrument nevertheless.'

Though I would have loved to spend longer in such august surroundings, the Doctor's commentary was attracting some hostile looks from the few scholars who were using the reading room, who I supposed must already have been disturbed by the racket of the cabinet's mysterious operation.

Hurriedly, therefore, I said, 'Shouldn't we be moving on, Doctor? If there are other foreign bidders at this auction, they're probably staying at the Howard Hotel tonight. We should have a look at your competition.'

'Of course,' the Doctor granted magnanimously, and led me out into a quadrangle of green and grey that would have looked perfectly at home in the cloisters of Oxford or Cambridge.

As we walked, he surprisingly said, 'I should apologise for my shortness earlier. I was frustrated at the futility of our errand. And sometimes... I admit I resent the restrictions of my larger mission here. I understand my part and its importance – I am to see out this War, observing its progress and that of the history surrounding it, until it has all been thoroughly witnessed and can thus be considered fixed

beyond question. That is what my own employers require, and I share their goals.'

He sighed. 'But, oh, Miss Weston... when you have walked among the constellations of heaven, it is hard not to dwell upon past greatness.'

It was unlike him to be so forthcoming, or so poetical, and I found I had no reply that I could make.

A few turns later, we were outside Trinity College, and facing a vast colonnaded frontage that the Doctor told me was in fact the rear of the Bank of Ireland. 'At least, I assume it still is,' he added. 'At one time it was the Parliament building. I was last in Dublin one June forty years ago. I remember the day well, but it's possible my local knowledge may be out of date.'

For my own part I had never visited the city, or even the country, and was still a little dazed by the abruptness of our transition. The Doctor's Mediaeval costume – which I admit I had forgotten he was wearing, so used was I to this foible of his – was exciting some humorous interest on the part of the locals.

We paused in a newsagent's to buy a map of the city, and then the Doctor led me through its streets, foreign now but within my lifetime as British – officially, at least – as London itself, noting landmarks as we passed. We crossed the Liffey at O'Connell Bridge, towards the statue of the great Catholic emancipator whose name it bears, its plinth emblazoned with the image of the harp I'd just seen. We passed another classical façade, impressive in its own right but practically homely after those other buildings, that I learned was the General Post Office where the Easter Uprising began. Not long afterwards we reached the square Georgian bulk of the Howard Hotel.

It was late afternoon by now, and the December sky was dark. The doorman was far from impressed by the Doctor's fancy dress, taking him for an actor and probably a drunk one, but pounds sterling are generally accepted there still, and a generous tip soothed his qualms. At the desk I booked us a suite of two bedrooms and a sitting-room, using the byname 'Dr Bute', while the gentleman who sometimes goes by it wandered away, blithely uninterested in such mundane practicalities.

I found him five minutes later in the hotel bar, nursing a scotch. He proffered me a white wine, and murmured, 'Have you seen who else is here?'

I sat and, as innocuously as I could, glanced around. As one might well expect, there were several knots of men in business suits, conferring over their drinks. Several of them also wore an awkward air which suggested to me that they might have been more comfortable in uniform.

I noticed in particular a group of three men in public-school ties and regulation moustaches, sitting with a middle-aged lady whose meek air was that of secretary. I recognised the arrangement at once. 'Auntie's agents,' I noted. 'The men are army officers, but the woman is in charge.'

The Doctor inclined his head. 'I thought as much. Who else?'

After a moment I realised that I could hear several languages being spoken, though the unfamiliar accents of the local customers had disguised them at first. Since no one in the bar was wearing national costume or conspicuously waving a flag, I closed my eyes and concentrated on their voices instead.

'Is that Russian?' I asked after a moment.

'*Da,*' the Doctor replied jocularly. 'The two gentlemen at the table beneath the bust of Wellington are undoubtedly Red Army officers. With the prospect of a victory in sight, the cannier thinkers in the Allied governments will be looking towards gaining an advantage in the status quo that follows. I am pleased to say that that period lies beyond my remit. If my employers wish it observed, they may get someone else in for the job.'

'I see,' I agreed doubtfully, and listened again. A few seconds later I opened my eyes wide, and turned to stare in astonishment at a group of men drinking pale beer at a secluded table. 'Are those *Germans?*' I asked in appalled astonishment. Though they were not being especially loud, nor were they were making any effort to disguise the language they were speaking in.

The Doctor nodded gravely, but wisely refrained from replying with a *Ja*.

I said, 'Ireland may be a neutral country, but I'm very surprised that they're welcome here.'

He frowned at me. 'Ignoring such distinctions, Miss Weston, is what neutrality means. From what I understand, your countrymen are not universally popular in Ireland either.'

'I realise that,' I replied, a little tartly. 'But still...'

'Oh, I doubt they have announced themselves as representatives

of the Reich,' the Doctor rumbled offhandedly. 'They will be posing as private citizens, no doubt, although I'm sure they're all high-ranking party members.'

I hope I am not prejudiced against the German people, Auntie, but when it comes to their leaders I find it very difficult to forget whose torpedoes killed my fiancé and his crewmates. The Doctor's amused insouciance in their presence offended me.

I said, 'If you'll excuse me, I prefer *red* wine.' Seething, I walked across to the bar without asking whether he'd like another.

As I approached, a man of around my own age sitting on a bar stool raised his Guinness at me. I ignored him. 'A glass of your house red wine, please,' I told the young woman behind the bar.

'It's welcome you are to it,' she replied with a smile and a rather inappropriate wink.

'Can I get this for you, ma'am?' asked the nearby man, in what I knew immediately for an American accent. He was in shirtsleeves, black silk with a white tie to match his pint, and had dark curly hair. 'Maggie here won't keep me company,' he continued, nodding at the redheaded barmaid, who gave him a bland smile in return, 'and if I can't drink with someone, I've got to go back to the boffins I came here with.' He nodded across to yet another table, where an assortment of bespectacled men peered down at what I guessed was an auction catalogue, discussing it in guarded whispers.

'Thank you, no,' I replied coldly. I might be annoyed with the Doctor, but I was emphatically not in search of *that* kind of comfort.

'No problem,' he replied easily, unoffended. 'Say, though, that guy you're with – is that the Doctor? I mean, *the* Doctor? Bryce or Bree or whatever his name is?'

I looked at the American anew, in some surprise. 'You know him?' I asked. It didn't occur to me to deny it. I knew our presence here was, if not forbidden, certainly disapproved of – but really, who else might be mistaken for the Doctor?

He offered me his hand. 'John Marvell,' he told me, as I shook it warily. 'Call me Jack.' I introduced myself, and he went on, 'Oh, the Doctor's quite the celebrity, Miss Weston. Those guys haven't recognised him yet –' he gestured once again at his colleagues, now apparently arguing over which was allowed to look at the catalogue the right way up –'but when they do they'll be all over him, believe me.'

‘You share his... interests?’ I asked, cautiously. The Doctor’s *interests* are eclectic, enormously so, but given Jack Marvell’s presence here I thought that I could guess in which field he considered him a celebrity.

Marvell glanced round quickly and saw that Maggie was at the far end of the bar, pouring glasses of some clear spirit for the Red Army officers. ‘That would be a state secret,’ he smiled. ‘But yeah, some of my colleagues write him regularly.’ I supposed that I would recognise their names, but Marvell was being cagey enough not to give them. ‘If your guy was interested in taking things beyond the theoretical, I guess he’d be out there with us, at the desert workings. But he’s a cautious old bird, from what I hear.’ The phrase made me think of the Doctor’s owl.

‘He’s certainly not interested in being a party to weapons research, if that’s what you mean,’ I replied.

‘I can’t possibly confirm that,’ said Marvell, with a knowing smile. ‘All I’ll say is, there are more uses for alchemy than turning lead into gold.’

‘I’m well aware of that,’ I said. I shuddered, remembering the business of the Fulcanelli formula, when the Doctor had prevented an agent of the Reich from acquiring the plans for an alchemical weapon whose devastating capability I still have nightmares about.

‘Say though,’ said Marvell, ‘where’s he going now?’ And I turned to see the Doctor hastening out of the room, before stopping beyond the doorway and beckoning me urgently.

Well, he *was* my employer. ‘Please excuse me, Mr Marvell,’ I told my new friend, and he shrugged, unoffended.

I hurried over to joined the Doctor, who seized me by the arms and moved me aside. ‘*He’s* here!’ he hissed, peering back into the room around the door-jamb.

I could have taken pleasure in his discomfiture, given how *blasé* he had been about he presence of my own *bêtes noires* a moment previously, but instead I felt a hideous chill. I knew of only one man who would prompt that reaction in the Doctor, and I shared it with him wholly.

‘*Him?*’ I repeated. ‘Where?’

‘With the Germans,’ snapped the Doctor. ‘I don’t think he saw me. No, don’t!’ he told me peremptorily as I went to glance round the doorframe. ‘He might see *you*.’

‘I have to,’ I told him, and made to do so.

The German party had moved their stools around to welcome a newcomer, a white-suited man with a cigarette in a holder, who was speaking easily to them in their own language. His face was smooth and, but for the livid scar that ran down the left temple and cheek, youthfully beautiful.

He laughed at something one of the party officials said, and the mellifluous sweetness of the sound turned my stomach. Then he turned to stare at me directly with those fire-dark eyes, and raised his glass towards me with a cold smile.

I stepped back out of view. ‘You’re right,’ I agreed. ‘Of course you are. It’s the Magus. And he’s here with the Nazis.’

* * *

We retreated to our second-floor suite. On the way up, the Doctor asked at the desk for a copy of the catalogue of the Robartes auction to be brought to us.

‘That *beast!*’ I declared, once the door was closed behind us. However many times we met the Magus – at the British Museum, in the hidden ruins of a Roman temple to Mithras, in the haunted shell of a bombed-out church in Bermondsey – I could not rid myself of the fascination and fear born of our first encounter at Simony’s House of Likenesses, when he had nearly mesmerised me into betraying the Doctor.

I do not think that I will ever appreciate being in the thrall of any man. ‘Why is he working with *them?*’ I asked.

For all his sins, and they were legion, the Magus had only ever served his own interests. Oh, he might claim he followed the commandment of his own mysterious employer, the Unity, ‘to accomplish’ – but in practice, what he aimed to accomplish was always aimed at bringing him closer to the only thing that gave him pleasure, power over others. If he had thrown his lot in with the Fuehrer, then the Allied victory of which the Doctor so confidently spoke was far from assured.

I have to say I was furious with you, Auntie, for trying to keep away from here the one man in the Empire who stood any chance of stopping the Magus, and also disproportionately angry with myself for my small part in that deception.

‘That,’ declaimed the Doctor, ‘is what we must find out. Clearly, one of the lots in this auction is something of tremendous power, something that the Magus and the Reich are willing to join forces to get their hands on. And I very much doubt that they will stop at merely bidding for it. No, they’ll have come here prepared to steal and to kill if necessary, but to leave with what they came for, by hook or by crook.’

‘What is it, though?’ I asked.

‘What indeed,’ he agreed, and opened up the slim leather folder that held the auction catalogue. ‘What could this Robartes have owned that is so valuable? I can see cups, sceptres, swords, all the standard ceremonial paraphernalia – he seems especially keen on masks. But there’s nothing of particular note there. Oh, a bronze head!’ he exclaimed. ‘I wonder whether it’s as nice as mine.’

I sighed.

‘Harps, statuettes, falconry equipment...,’ he went on. ‘The Great Smaragdine Tablet would be of great interest to an alchemist if it were real, but it will naturally be a copy. That may have lured in the American fellow I saw you talking to, but it would hardly deceive the Magus.’ He turned the final page. ‘There’s nothing here that could possibly justify – oh, but *that’s* interesting.’

He fell silent, staring at the page, and I leaned in to see what had caught his attention.

‘“Lot 58. Glass jar, sealed, age unknown,”’ I read. “Contents, an unidentified brown liquid. Label in Robartes’s hand reads *Ale from the Country of the Young*.”’ I stared at him as he continued to frown furiously at the entry. ‘What do you suppose it really is?’

‘I’d hope it wasn’t,’ he replied, ‘but I can see nothing else here that *he* might want to acquire. And if it is what I think it is...’ he paused for thought for several moments.

‘Miss Weston,’ he said brightly then, his eyes twinkling. ‘Are you available for a spot of burglary this evening?’

* * *

A friendly word with a porter established that the items for the auction were being held overnight in the hotel’s secure vault. Some of the pieces – a golden ceremonial mask with emerald eyes, for instance – would have had great value even to a mundane collector, and so a

round-the-clock guard had been mounted in addition to the sturdy doors and locks.

'That shouldn't present any great problem,' breezed the Doctor. 'We'll cosh the guards – gently, of course – then pick the locks, grab the jar and hotfoot it back to Trinity.'

'Isn't there a subtler way of incapacitating the men?' I asked. Recalling his scientific knowledge, I suggested, 'Some chloroform, perhaps?' But the Doctor was happily set upon his coshing plan.

Fortunately, Auntie, you have trained me for such eventualities, and I was even able to improvise a cosh for each of us by breaking up the earthenware ashtrays provided in our bedrooms, grinding the shards into gravel, and pouring it into a stout pair of socks.

It would not do, of course, for us to attempt our errand while the hotel was still busy, so I prolonged this labour by dipping into a book of poems by Robartes's friend W.B. Yeats, which some previous guest had left in our shared sitting room. I am afraid I didn't get on with it, but I'm probably not the sort of reader he intended it for.

It was after midnight, once the bar had closed and the evening workers departed, leaving only the night staff to attend to the slumbering guests, that the Doctor and I crept down the service staircase by the light of his torch, from our own floor to the hotel basement.

The stairs led to an ill-lit service area which gave onto such essentials as the wine-cellar, the coal-cellar and the laundry, all quiet and chilly at this time of night. The entrance to the vault was at the far end, where a bare electric bulb illuminated two chairs and a card table set up in front of the steel door.

A game of cards was in progress on the table, but neither of the two guards was anywhere to be seen.

'That's a stroke of luck!' declared the Doctor, blithely, and strode across to the door, a sturdy affair with a combination lock and a handle in the shape of a metal wheel that could have been used to steer a ship. Whipping out a stethoscope, he began to twist the dial experimentally.

I followed cautiously. 'Doctor,' I whispered, 'the guards surely wouldn't abandon their posts at the same time. That's why there are two of them, in case of calls of nature and the like.'

'Perceptive, Miss Weston,' said a silky voice, and ice slithered across my skin. 'I fear nature had little to do with their

disappearance.'

The Magus stepped through the door from the laundry, his pristine white suit shining in the dim cellar. He held a pistol with a silencer, levelled unwaveringly at my head. The Doctor looked up from his safecracking endeavours in alarm.

Behind our foe emerged two figures, also armed. For a moment I expected the silent blonde twins who had accompanied him so often in our past encounters, but then I recalled that one of the pair had perished in the doodlebug raid that devastated the Temple of Gog and Magog.

This, then, must be the surviving twin – and the other figure, a burly thug with his Luger now aimed at the Doctor, was one of the Germans I'd seen with the Magus in the hotel bar. In the darkened room behind them I could see a limp arm dangling out of a wicker laundry crate.

Slowly the Doctor stood and spread his hands, the stethoscope dangling around his neck. His reply did not mirror the caution of his actions, however.

'This is a new depth to sink to, even for you,' he told the Magus in disgust. 'I thought your role here was to serve the Unity, not the Reich.'

'Sometimes one finds a temporary alignment of interests.' The Magus smiled like a crocodile. 'Financial and otherwise.' He nodded to his companions. 'Umbra you know, of course. You'll be interested to hear she still blames you for the loss of Aura. And this is Kurt Schaefer, known in his profession as *der Blitzräuber*, the fastest safecracker this side of the Atlantic.'

'*Guten abend*.' Schaefer inclined his head ironically.

The Magus continued, 'I anticipated that Kurt's services might be needed, long before I saw you making your clumsy exit from the bar tonight. We would of course have preferred to keep our actions here scrupulously legal, but I could hardly trust you not to interfere.'

The Doctor was still disgusted. 'I can't believe that you would be so irresponsible,' he declared. 'For someone with our knowledge and power to align himself with either side in this conflict would be reprehensible, but the Germans? Are you intending to hand that villain Hitler his thousand-year Reich?'

'It is no secret that the Fuehrer is not in the best of health, Doctor,' the Magus replied smoothly. 'He is no longer a young man,

and the War has taken its toll upon him... as did certain unwise habits of his youth, long since abandoned. His generals fear that he may not last until the inevitable German victory.'

'Poppycock!' my employer exclaimed. 'Inevitable, my eye. Without your meddling, Hitler's Reich will have collapsed by the summer. It doesn't have a thousand days left, let alone a thousand years.'

'Is that your professional assessment, Doctor?' purred the Magus.

'It is,' the Doctor replied stoutly.

'And how confident are you of your safecracking skills?' he asked.

The Doctor frowned. 'I've no doubt I could give your pet lightning thief a run for his money.'

'Good,' murmured the Magus. 'Umbra?'

Impassively, the blonde woman turned her gun on Schaefer and shot him in the chest. I am no stranger to violence, but the suddenness of it shocked me. I gasped, and flinched away from the Magus's own gun.

'We'll need another laundry basket,' the Magus sighed, as Schaefer fell lifeless. 'On this occasion, Doctor, I must concur with your prediction. The War will end soon, in an Allied victory, and Hitler may well not live to see it. That is why the Nazis wished to acquire Robartes's sample of the elixir, and were willing to pay me a great deal of money to obtain it for them. It's also why they availed me of the late Mr Schaefer's services, though as you correctly point out, I have no further need of those.'

'I meant no such thing,' the Doctor growled, 'as well you know.'

'Oh, so you'll refuse to cooperate?' the Magus raised an elegant eyebrow. 'I hardly think so, with Miss Weston's life in the balance. We know each other too well, Doctor, for you to deceive me on that count. But I'm afraid you have misunderstood my ultimate purpose here.'

Doing my best to ignoring the weapon, I said, 'You intend to steal this elixir, whatever it is, and use it to prolong Hitler's wretched life. What more is there to understand?'

'I also said that Germany will lose the War,' the Magus reminded us. 'Hitler's survival won't change that. If he were the tactical genius his sycophants paint him as, they would be winning already. No, my fear is that he will not live to face defeat. I intend to ensure that he

does. ’

The Doctor’s face creased in perplexity. ‘To what end?’

‘So that he can stand trial,’ the Magus said. ‘A premature demise would destroy any chance of making him pay for his crimes. Without the example of Hitler’s utter humiliation in full sight of the world, his insane philosophies could gain ascendance once again within a century, and all the same chaos could ensue. And that would not suit the aims of my ultimate employers – nor, I believe, of yours.’

‘Hmm. It isn’t an elixir of *youth*, of course, whatever Robartes believed,’ the Doctor noted with a furious frown. ‘It wouldn’t take your unpleasant friend back to his teens. But it could certainly prolong his life, even if he came to wish otherwise.’

The Magus’s blonde acolyte had returned from hiding Schaefer’s body in the laundry, and stood now with her gun at the ready, awaiting her master’s orders.

‘Well,’ the Doctor concluded, ‘I can’t say I believe a word of it. But as it happens it’s rather moot, for the moment at least.’

The Magus sighed like a snake. ‘Because you will refuse to open the vault? No, Doctor, I think we’ve covered that.’

The Doctor stepped aside. ‘Because I don’t need to. It was unlocked when we first arrived.’

Though I have seen the Magus defeated, I have rarely seen him look so confounded as he did in that moment. ‘Unlocked?’ he repeated.

‘By someone who was here before you, evidently,’ said the Doctor. ‘Let’s see what they took, shall we? Although I believe I could hazard a guess.’

And he seized the wheel and swung open the heavy door.

* * *

It took about twenty minutes to be certain, particularly since the Magus refused to search alongside the Doctor and me, or indeed to trust us unless he and Umbra were observing with a gun trained on each of us at all times. But in the end it was quite clear that the only item missing from the dazzling array of treasures that Michael Robartes had assembled over a lifetime as the leader of the Order of the Alchemical Rose was the old jar of brown liquid that he believed had come from ‘the Country of the Young’.

‘Have your Nazi paymasters double-crossed you?’ I asked the Magus, rather gleefully. ‘Or was it the Russians, do you think?’

‘Not the Americans, at least,’ the Doctor said. ‘If I know their research interests, and I do, it’s the Smaragdine Tablet that they’re after.’ He indicated a translucent triangle of green crystal, inscribed with dense writing in an alphabet I thought was Greek. ‘They’ll have a lovely time discovering that it’s a fake,’ he went on. ‘I suspect our Red Army friends are thinking along similar lines. What about the British, Miss Weston?’

‘Oh, the same, I imagine,’ I replied. ‘If Stalin and Uncle Sam both want it, Auntie won’t want to be left out.’

‘It’s not the Germans either, though,’ said the Magus, with an attempt at his usual smug calm. I was rather enjoying seeing him so flustered. ‘They had no reason to retain me, if they planned to steal the sample without my help. The risks of deceiving me are well known. Besides, none of their delegation could have managed it without Schroeder, and he’s been with me all evening.’

‘Another party, then,’ said the Doctor. ‘One all of us were unaware of. Can you find out who?’ he added gruffly, and I realised to my surprise that he was asking the Magus.

The occultist nodded thoughtfully. At his direction – the guns increasingly a formality, it seemed – we filed out of the vault, back into the cellar room. The Doctor closed the door.

The Magus drew a phial of powder from his pocket and began chanting over it, passing his hands in a series of complex gestures, for all the world like a stage magician trying to distract the audience from wherever the real trick was taking place. At his nod, Umbra turned out the light, and we saw that the dust in the phial had begun to emit a greenish phosphorescence.

‘Chronally charged to resonate only yorewards,’ the Doctor observed incomprehensibly. ‘I suppose that’s rather clever,’ he begrudged.

A few more repetitions of the chant, and then the Magus unstoppered the flask and tossed it into the space in front of the vault door. It settled slowly, drifting through the air, and as it did so it outlined the shape of a figure – the Doctor, crouched at the combination lock with his stethoscope, just as he had been half an hour before.

The Magus nodded sharply, whirled his hands and, as the dust

rose into the air as if flurried by the wind, he repeated his chant once more. This time, when it came down, it settled into a different shape.

It was a woman, or a girl – young, pretty, with long hair. She, too, was captured in the act of turning the combination lock, and though she wore no stethoscope her face held a similar expression of abstracted concentration.

'It's the barmaid,' I realised. In the dim glow, I saw both men turn to stare at me in bafflement. 'Her name's Maggie,' I remembered, as the Magus's servant switched on the light again.

'Well, she seemed a lively enough young woman. But I can't claim to have expected that.' The Doctor considered. 'Nor can I believe a barmaid took it into her own head to steal from her employer, then chose *that* particular swag. So the question is, who's she working for?'

'Someone who wants to live forever, I assume,' I said. 'There must be rather a lot of candidates.'

'Very few who knew what Robartes held, or understood its significance,' the Magus observed coolly. 'If it's not a government but a private individual, they must be a highly experienced occult practitioner. I can think of perhaps a dozen living who might fit the bill, none of whom I would wish to see gain that kind of power.'

'No, that wouldn't be to your advantage at all, would it?' the Doctor observed acidly.

'Nor that of your employers,' the Magus sighed. 'The chaos arising from such a turn of events would be immense.'

The Doctor harrumphed, by which I knew that the Magus's point had hit home. 'Well,' he said. 'Can you find out where this barmaid's gone?'

'I hope so,' said the Magus. 'What colour was her hair, Miss Weston?'

'A dark auburn,' I said, perplexed. The Magus gave Umbra a nod, and the blonde woman left at once for the service stairs.

'If we find her,' the Doctor warned him, 'there can be no question of handing the sample over to the Germans. We must find a way to render it inert.'

'I never intended to hand it over,' the Magus said. 'I shall administer it to Hitler myself.'

The Doctor shook his head emphatically. 'Far too risky,' he snapped. 'Even if you're right that an immortal Fuehrer wouldn't

change the progress of the War, he's a figurehead who's fast losing his potency. If he regains it, then escapes capture during the German defeat, this whole grisly business could start up again in a future generation. No, our only responsible course of action is to destroy the sample.'

'I would suggest we argue that point once we've found it,' replied the Magus grimly.

* * *

We agreed to reconvene in the shared sitting-room of the Doctor's and my suite. My skin crawled at the idea of inviting the Magus inside, although since the time he burgled our offices I knew full well that he was no vampire to require our permission.

As soon as I was alone with the Doctor, I protested, 'You can't seriously be considering working with *him!*'

'I wouldn't if there were any choice about it,' my employer replied sombrely. 'I know how much you dislike him, Joan, and believe me I share the sentiment. But he possesses practical knowledge that I do not – and wouldn't care to, given how he acquired it. Alone, it would take me days to track down this Maggie, and by then her employer could have drunk the elixir. In this matter, time is more than usually of the essence.'

I wondered whether it was necessarily true that Maggie was working for another party. Could a young woman not herself be an 'occult practitioner'? Perhaps this Robartes had a daughter, whom he had taught. And even if she *was* being paid to retrieve the sample from the hotel, might she not have gathered its significance and used it on herself nevertheless?

But I had more urgent concerns. I said, 'Even aside from everything we've seen the Magus do – which I'll remind you include three murders just this evening – we can't trust him an inch! You *know* that if we find the sample he'll find a way to double-cross us and take it for himself!'

The Doctor nodded gravely. 'We must be on our guard,' he said. 'I have a friend who may help us with that.'

Then a knock came at the door, and invite the Magus in we did. I shuddered anew at his cloying presence.

'I can locate her,' he confirmed, as the silent Umbra showed us

the long strand of red hair that she had found in the bar. 'But you must help me to follow. My transport is... elsewhere.'

The Doctor barked a laugh. 'Nazis impounded it to be sure you'd cooperate, did they? Now I see why you're so eager for us to work together. Well, as luck would have it, my own cabinet's here in Dublin.'

'I didn't imagine you'd trusted Miss Weston's safety to the sea crossing,' the Magus said, raising an eyebrow. I found myself wishing I shared his faith in my employer's protective instincts.

This time the Magus's ritual was more complex and involved a number of pieces of arcane equipment borrowed from Robartes's collection – none of which, the Doctor assured me, had any intrinsic power, but all of which were necessary for the rite. Having smashed our own ashtrays, we had to borrow one from the lounge to burn the incense.

We also borrowed a map of Ireland and a globe. After a great deal of convoluted and frankly tedious flummery on the Magus's part, much of which I am sure was simply for show, the hair in the centre of the ceremonial tridekagram chalked on our coffee table began to twitch and writhe of its own accord.

Delicately, the Magus picked it up by one end, and held it near the globe. As if the sphere had been electrified, the hair stood out straight, pointing at the tiny shape of Ireland.

'She's not left the country, then,' the Doctor commented.

The hair showed no interest in the Doctor's Dublin street map, but when presented with the map of the island it indicated a precise spot: a fishing-village in the west of County Kerry, on the Atlantic coast, named Carne.

'That's nearly two hundred miles away,' I said. 'How can she have got so far already?' The men exchanged a glance. 'Magic, I suppose,' I exclaimed, disgusted.

The Doctor carefully marked the spot with a pencil, then pocketed the map. He stood. 'Let's hurry, then. For all we know, our magic Maggie may have met her principal already.'

We walked in silence through the night-time streets, avoiding drunks and vagrants, and listening to the music and chatter spilling out of various private houses. Faced with such reminders of normality, I was forcibly struck by how much the War has changed London, and how dispiriting our necessary disciplines have become. It served to

distract me from the company we were keeping, at least. Beside us strolled the worst man I had ever met, casually smoking through his holder a cigarette of some noxious Turkish blend, while his silent assistant glided behind. I found myself glancing back repeatedly in case she had once again drawn her gun.

The Doctor's lockpicks got us through a back entrance to Trinity College and then, after some careful navigation of its silent corridors, into the Long Room itself. Welcoming the Magus and Umbra into the Doctor's cabinet felt like even more of a violation, but the Doctor gestured disinterestedly towards a pair of wing-back chairs and involved himself with the wooden-panelled controls.

The Magus remained standing beside the doors, Umbra at his side – an ostentatious show of respect for his status as a guest, but I saw how his eyes gleamed with avarice as he stared around at the Doctor's assemblage of arcana.

* * *

This time, perhaps thanks to the cabinet's unwholesome occupant, its translocation took longer, but shortly afterwards the Doctor was ushering us out onto a clifftop path in the ocean-smelling night. A biting gale was blowing, clouds scudded across the stars, and I could hear the sound of waves crashing beneath us.

After we left, the Doctor ducked back inside, to join us a moment later wearing a coat. As he did, I thought I saw a winged shape climb into the dark sky.

'I don't care for this wind,' remarked the Doctor. The coat was from the trenches of the last war, and made a ludicrous contrast with his Mediaeval garb. A long muffler was wrapped around his neck. I wished he had thought to offer me one.

The village lay beneath us to the north, in a dip between craggy headlands, and we descended cautiously. The path was muddy and icy, but the Magus's white suit seemed to repel all dirt. Some of the rough stone cottages ahead were lit, and there were lanterns on the beach where fishermen were preparing their boats for their early-morning disembarkation. Obviously this weather that seemed so stormy to me represented business as usual for them.

'Could Maggie be leaving by boat?' I wondered. 'Perhaps there's a ship waiting out in the ocean.'

But the Magus drew the enchanted hair out of his breast pocket, and showed us how it pointed to the far headland. I saw now that a larger house stood there, a many-storeyed mansion that contrasted with the simplicity of the fishermen's cottages.

'And who lives there, I wonder?' the Doctor speculated.

A moment later, we found someone who could tell us. A woman, perhaps returning from delivering her husband his breakfast at the beach, was approaching one of the cottages with a lantern. The Doctor hailed her. 'Good morning, madam!'

She glared at the four of us with frank suspicion – as well she might, in such an out-of-the-way place at this time in the morning, and with the Doctor and the Magus dressed as they were. 'What d'ye want?' she asked roughly. Though she spoke in English, not Gaelic, her accent was much thicker than those we had heard in Dublin, and her manner was proportionately hostile.

The Magus gave the Doctor a significant look, and to my own disgust I understood that his charms would be of value to us here. 'My dear girl,' he said, quite tenderly, and I realised that the woman was, in all likelihood, younger than I was myself, for all her matronly air. 'We are strangers here, and a little lost, I'm afraid. We wondered who owns the big house up on the headland there?'

'Oh, *them*.' The woman sniffed reflexively, but it seemed that the Magus's enchantment had done its work. Leaning in conspiratorially, as if confiding in a lover, she said, 'They call themselves Sisters. Nuns, they're supposed to be. The Sisters of Our Lady of the Eternal Flame.'

Again, a glance passed between the Magus and the Doctor that I could not read.

'If you want to know what I think, they're a pack o'heathens,' she went on. 'Hussies, too. What nun wears scarlet robes? Not that I've seen a man up there, mind,' she added judiciously. 'Strictly forbidden up there, all the menfolk are. The girls, though...'

She stopped abruptly, as if wondering why she was telling us so much, and immediately the Magus resumed his soothing, infinitely sweet voice. 'Do you know a young girl called Maggie, my dear? She's quite young, with long red hair. We think she may have something that belongs to us.'

'Oh, *that* Maggie. Sure I do,' said the woman, her voice low and conspiratorial once more. '*That* Maggie's Biddie O'Heacha's youngest girl. Oh, she's a thief all right, and more. Her ma sent her into service

away in Dublin, but she came back in disgrace a year back. Always been wild, she has, so when she said she wanted to join the Sisters, Biddie said good riddance to her and good luck to them. I don't think it's religion she was after getting, though. I told you they're hussies.'

'I see,' the Magus said. 'So if we were to look for this Maggie O'Heacha, we should ask among the Sisters.'

'You're welcome to try,' the woman said. 'If you ask me, I'd send your womenfolk in to do it. I'll tell you again, the Sisters don't welcome men.'

The Magus thanked the woman effusively, and she retired into her cottage, leaving us in the tiny main street of Carne.

* * *

'So,' said the Magus. 'They have taken back what was theirs.'

'So it would seem,' agreed the Doctor quietly. 'I had no idea they had a presence here.'

'And they are recruiting from the local populace,' the Magus added. 'We shall both need to report this, I expect.'

'Who did?' I asked. 'Who have? Who are? What in Heaven's name are you both talking about?' I felt furious at being cut out of the Doctor's conversations with this monster, as if his new pact with the Devil had removed all the need he had for me. 'Who *are* these Sisters of the...' In my anger my memory failed me.

'Eternal Flame,' the Doctor supplied. '"Our Lady" is a sop to local sentiment, I would guess, unless their theology has changed rather radically. They are a very ancient order of sorceresses. The elixir is their creation – or at least they guard it very jealously. It's made... abroad. But if they keep a local supply, it would go some way towards explaining how any of it ended up in Robartes's hands. And since it did, it quite clears up the question of who Miss O'Heacha was working for. Whether they recruited her specifically for her local knowledge, or it was simply good luck, she was the obvious candidate among them to recover the lost sample from the hotel.'

'So we've come all this way just to conclude that Robartes's jar is in safe hands?' I said. 'You *trust* these Sisters? *Both* of you?' I added incredulously.

The Magus spread his own hands wide, a gesture of innocent helplessness with just a touch of the messianic. 'They would not be my

choice of guardians, but such they have been, since time immemorial. If they've taken back the sample, then it is as if it was never out of their hands. And having lost it once, they will most assuredly be on their guard against it happening again. Hitler will have to die in his own time, it seems.'

Perched on the roof of a nearby cottage, an owl hooted derisorily. The Doctor shot it an annoyed glance.

Aloud he said, 'I can only agree. I've no special fondness for the order in question, but guarding the elixir is their assigned role. The natural order has been restored.'

We stared at one another – the Doctor, scowling like a bear in his greatcoat, the Magus smiling broadly as he lit a new cigarette, the impassive Umbra, and me. The Magus drew a lungful of sweet smoke through his holder, and then said, 'Well, we shan't trouble you for a lift back to London, Doctor, or even Dublin. You should get back to your post and get on with observing what's left of this portion of history.'

'And you?' the Doctor said. His voice was flinty, volunteering nothing.

'Oh, I'm sure there's a railway station within striking distance,' said the Magus. 'Or perhaps a fishing-vessel can be prevailed upon to take us around the coast to Cork or Tralee. I must turn my mind to retrieving my own cabinet from the Berlin treasure-vaults. I dare say our paths will cross again.'

'Oh, I hope they shall,' the Doctor said, still without the slightest trace of warmth. 'I won't offer to shake hands.'

'I would never expect such a thing,' the Magus said with a smile. He strolled away towards the beach, with Umbra in tow, and the Doctor and I turned our feet back towards the clifftop path.

* * *

'You don't believe any of that, do you?' I asked as we approached the place where the cabinet stood, utterly incongruous against its rural surroundings. 'You surely can't believe the Magus would give up so easily?'

'Not for an instant,' the Doctor confirmed as he fished for his keys. 'Giving up just isn't in his nature, even when, as now, it would be the sensible thing to do.'

The owl swooped down out of the starlit sky and alighted on the Doctor's shoulder. 'You very nearly gave the game away,' he told it severely. 'I should have you stuffed. They're on the way up the other headland, I suppose?'

'Who?' said the owl, all innocence.

'You know very well who. They're making for the house, of course,' the Doctor told me. 'I imagine the Magus will send Umbra in first – she is a woman, after all – then try his own luck if she fails.'

'So why are we leaving?' I asked as we stepped inside the cabinet. 'What happened to stopping the Magus from giving Hitler immortality?'

'Oh, I think the Sisters can handle the Magus,' the Doctor said. 'But just in case, we're going to warn them.'

* * *

The house stood on a headland jutting into the ocean, with waves crashing against the rocks all around. The beach below the cliffs on which it perched was littered with the wreckage of boats, presumably accumulated over the ages.

The Doctor's cabinet now stood in an angle between two stone walls, all that remained of some older building. It had proven impossible to locate it anywhere nearer the house. He strode along the uneven path that led to the front door, the owl still perched on his shoulder, and I followed, looking around nervously for Umbra or the Magus to arrive. I was sure that our own approach would be obvious to them.

But as we walked, a mist swirled up around us, in blatant defiance of the bitter Atlantic wind, and soon I could barely see ahead. I felt the Doctor seize my hand, and clutched it gratefully. And then, a moment later, as quickly as it had arrived the fog dissipated, and we stood inside the house of the Sisters.

The Doctor and I stood on the tiled floor of a large room, lit by the flare of braziers. Beyond the gothic arches of its windows, I could see the headland's end, and the choppy ocean furled beneath the clouds.

Directly facing us were the Magus, who looked as surprised as I felt, and Umbra, whose face betrayed no emotion. We were surrounded by a ring of women wearing robes and wimples like those

of Roman Catholic nuns, but white and scarlet where a nun's would be white and black. Around their necks, in place of crosses, they wore stylised wooden flames.

I glanced around in dazed bewilderment, and caught the eye of one young Sister, a strand of red hair escaping from her wimple – the Howard Hotel barmaid, Maggie O'Heacha. She winked at me.

'So here you are,' intoned the oldest of the women, who seemed to be in her eighties. Whatever else Robartes's ale might be, the Doctor was right that it was no Fountain of Youth. 'I knew that when we recovered the elixir, others would come to try to take it.' Her accent was unidentifiable, but not in the least Irish.

'On the contrary, madam,' the Doctor said politely, with a dismissive gesture at the Magus. 'I was coming here to *warn* you that this unpleasant specimen –'

'Silence,' insisted the oldest Sister, and to my considerable astonishment the Doctor obeyed. 'We need no warnings from the likes of you, Doctor.'

Smoothly, the Magus stepped in. 'I fear my counterpart has misrepresented me, dear lady. In point of fact it was *my* intention to come here and advise *you* –'

'Cease your deception, snake,' hissed a third of the Sisters, a dark-skinned woman – and the Magus, too, fell silent.

'*All* your deceptions,' this Sister added, and at her word the Magus's handsome face slid away, to reveal a ravaged, skull-like mask, with eyes staring in agony. I gasped at the sight.

'You understand so little,' the oldest Sister told the Doctor. 'You believed he wanted the elixir for another, but it was only ever for himself. Tell him, Magus.'

Through gritted teeth, the words forced from his throat, the Magus said, 'I was wounded more badly than you knew, that night in the Mithraeum. The priests had anointed the bull's horns with venom of the manticore. It kills slowly, but it kills.'

'Perhaps,' the leading Sister said. 'Perhaps there is an antidote, but if so it is not found in this sphere. You must look elsewhere for your salvation.'

She said a syllable, and the Magus vanished into nothingness before us. The Doctor betrayed no surprise at this.

'Very wise,' he said. 'Well then, since that's all settled –'

'And you, Doctor,' the Sister continued, and again the Doctor

inexplicably stopped speaking. ‘You who watch, and tell yourself you cannot interfere, except when you graciously decide to grant yourself permission. You who chafe against the bounds of your mission, yet will not argue with its justice. What have you accomplished tonight, except to bring a thief to our threshold?’

‘Well, I…’ the Doctor said, and then fell silent, this time of his own accord. Like him, I realised that the Sister was right. If we’d stayed at RAF Twinwood Farm, Auntie, as you wished, obediently investigating the mundane disappearance of Glenn Miller, nothing here would have happened differently, except that the Magus would have been unable to follow Maggie to Carne.

‘You tried, at least, to warn us of the consequence of your folly,’ said the Sister drily. ‘For that service that was no service, you shall have a reward that is no reward.’

She spoke the same word again, though with a different tone, and this time the Doctor vanished. Left unsupported suddenly, the owl hooted alarm and fluttered to a window-ledge. The silent Umbra and I were left alone inside the circle of Sisters.

‘Umbra Grey, Joan Weston,’ said the oldest Sister. ‘You have served men all your lives. You have walked behind them, carried their bags, opened their messages, run their errands, and been their constant shadows and companions.’

I rather objected to that characterisation – as far as it applied to me, at least – but having seen the power these Sisters wielded, I held my tongue.

She told us, ‘You have both earned freedom. It is clear now that our presence at this outpost has been unwise, and we will leave soon for our home. You may join us, if you choose. We will welcome you as the last initiates we take in this sphere.’

I stared at her, still utterly bewildered, but Umbra said, ‘Yes, Sister. I’d like that.’

* * *

The youngest members of the order, Maggie included, took the Magus’s erstwhile servant away and prepared her for initiation, while I considered the senior Sister’s offer. Alone in that impassive ring of old women, I felt like the altar stone at Stonehenge.

What *have* I accomplished, Auntie, in the past four years, either

as the Doctor's secretary or as your liaison? I have, if not 'served', then worked alongside a man: a genius, a lunatic, the most extraordinary and exasperating person I have ever met. And yet he bends his considerable powers, not towards improving the world for others, but to ensuring that it maintains its precarious course, for good or ill.

His employers would have him utterly passive, but his self-appointed task – all that he allows himself to do in this fragile and fiery sphere – is to prevent the efforts of outsiders to intervene. His interest is in how matters transpire without such interference.

Is that a worthwhile use of my own talents, Auntie? Have the Doctor and I accomplished as little together in the past four years as in the past twenty-four hours?

The Sisters have offered me a new world, undreamed-of powers, everlasting life... and companionship and sisterhood such as I have never known. But I have a duty, and I cannot neglect it.

I owe it to my country, to my service, and to you, Auntie, though I must say you've shown poor judgement at times. And I owe it to the Doctor. I know that for all his manner of gruff indifference, he relies on me far more than he can ever admit. Without me as his anchor, he merely occupies this world, observing life around him, like a man in an aquarium surrounded by tanks of fish. With me, he is connected to it.

What the Sisters offered me was real, even so. They offered me something of incalculable value: a choice. And like Umbra, I took it.

* * *

The transition to the offices of Bruce, Brae and Bute was instantaneous, quicker at the Sisters' word than even the translocations of the Doctor's cabinet. I looked around the dingy office. It was still early morning, dark and frosty outside, but by now, a little behind those Irish fishermen, the first of London's workers were stirring abroad. Mr Fine's boy had already delivered the papers, and the postman could not be far behind him.

My employer, though, was nowhere to be seen. I had assumed the Sisters had sent him back ahead of me – or perhaps, if they were feeling generous, to his cabinet, where he might achieve the same end under his own control. If the device was still in County Kerry, in the grounds of the Sisters' shortly-to-be deserted house, it would be tricky

to recover it. I might have to arrange that travel itinerary after all.

I considered going home, to wash and change my clothes if not to sleep; but I was in the office, and my working day was beginning. I began to scan the newspapers for matters that might prove momentarily deserving of the Doctor's mercurial attention.

There'd been a minor earthquake in Cheltenham. A plague of frogs in Lincolnshire. A sighting of a lake monster in the Manchester Ship Canal.

After ten minutes I realised that I was utterly unable to concentrate, and found myself instead climbing the stairs to the Doctor' room. The door was unlocked, as we had left it the night before, and I confirmed that it was quite deserted; emptier than ever, in fact, with the cabinet gone.

I wondered whether I could afford to treat myself to breakfast at a café.

As I descended the stairs, however, I heard the violent grinding and honking of the cabinet's mechanism, a noise like a factory for producing geese. I turned and rushed back up the stairs, but found the room as vacant as before.

Perhaps I was imagining things. Perhaps the Sisters had done something to my mind. They might have decided to drive me mad, so that my report of their existence wouldn't be believed.

Dispirited, I walked down to the office, and to my delight and astonishment saw that the Doctor's cabinet of miracles stood there, entirely out of its wonted place, crammed in behind the desk where he habitually sat. A muffled yell came from inside.

'Doctor?' I cried, then had to move the desk so that he could get the door open.

* * *

'I've seen the future,' was his rueful opening remark, once I'd made us both some tea. 'Something I've always scrupulously avoided, as you know. Those ghastly women sent me straight to the middle of next year. I suppose it was their idea of poetic justice.'

'Good heavens!' I said, aghast and elated at once. 'Do you mean to say you know what will happen in the War?'

'I do,' the Doctor beamed. He was sporting a loose pale suit with an open-necked shirt, printed in a bright pattern of beaches and palm

trees. I had rarely seen him wear anything so hideous. ‘And let us say your countrymen have little to fear. It would be appallling manners for me to reveal more than that, but I remained for several months, and saw the whole business worldwide thoroughly resolved. It would have done no good for me to return to the present and resume my post, knowing what the future held. Quite against my will, I had already witnessed the future, and that means that the present is crystallised. It cannot change now.’

‘Oh, God,’ I gasped. ‘Thank God, I mean. We all hoped, I suppose, that the War was going well – at last, after so long, so many dead. But to be certain…’ I was on the verge of tears.

‘There, there, Joan.’ Gingerly, as if I were an animal that might prove fierce, the Doctor patted my back.

He went on, ‘“A reward that is no reward,” that virago said. She showed me everything that I’ve been waiting for, as if the waiting weren’t the entire point. The work of this office has been circumvented, but it’s over, unavoidably so. My employers may begrudge its success as I do, but like me they cannot deny it.

‘I am free, at least until they find me some other task. I can take tea with Confucius or Ptolemy, just as before, but now I can roam further. I could direct the Pilot Star, or visit the throne of the Distributor in the region of the summer stars. I may observe whatever and wherever I want – and if I’m discreet about it, I might even accomplish; just a little, here and there.’

‘I’m pleased for you,’ I told him, sincerely. But I had been wondering something. ‘But, Doctor – was I there, in the future? Or will I be, I suppose I mean. What am I to do, without my work here? What *shall* I do? Did it occur to you to track me down, Doctor, and find out what I had been doing since today? Will I live to enjoy our victory, or will I walk out of here this afternoon and straight beneath a falling buzz-bomb?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘I searched, Miss Weston,’ he said. ‘I could find no trace of you. You vanish from the records, and it happens today.’

For a moment I was alarmed, but then I realised. ‘Ah, I’m afraid my name isn’t really Weston,’ I said. ‘I was assigned it by Auntie when I took this position. I suppose I shall be obliged to take a new one when I leave it.’

‘Oh, I know that.’ The Doctor grinned like a predatory cherub. ‘I

did my homework on you years ago. No, I believe the reason is entirely different.'

He pointed at the cabinet, its doors standing invitingly open.

'Joan,' he said, 'Would you do me the honour of joining me on another journey? This one might take us rather longer, I'm afraid. But it will, I hope, prove more productive than the last.'

'I should be glad to,' I said, 'if you could just wait while I write a final report for Auntie.'

‘Back! Back to your beginning!’

The Doctor’s opponent was crowing again, a bully secure in his victory, as the face of the irascible wartime detective disappeared. The Doctor found it difficult to argue with his confidence. With every moment of the Doctor’s past he swallowed, this recycled despot grew stronger and more triumphant, while he himself was ever more diminished, by now barely the Doctor at all.

How many more of these could there be still to come, he wondered, as yet another self drifted into view. Very few, surely.

Goodness, he had been fond of beards, though, hadn’t he? This was a solemn face, dark-haired, with prominent eyebrows and a wisdom beyond what by now were surely very limited years. He wore a ruffed collar, a brocade tunic and an academic air.

Had this one known the Sisters, or the Unity? Had he, too, visited Carne?

Well, what if he had. By now the Doctor’s curiosity, like the rest of him, was almost exhausted. He could do little more than watch and forget, as yet another life passed by, to vanish like a ghost before his eyes.

THE SEVEN SCHOLARS AND THE STORYTELLER

by Simon Bucher-Jones

Among the Christian storytellers, we find several proponents of the grand fantasy as well as the classic ghost story. In terms of quality, we can I think accept the judgment of history that J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis top the former, and M.R. James the later, but these were by no means the sole practitioners. I am happy to introduce some of the others here: R. H. Maldon, the Dean of Wells, penned the stories collected as Nine Ghosts *as unselfconscious tributes to his friend, M.R. James. This collection reprints his 'Stivinghoe Bank'. Then there is the Rev. St John-Escalon (1870 – 1937), a lecturer in Theology, and a member of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society[1]. His 'The Thing That Rocked the Cradle' remains a classic of the form, and we are glad to be able to bring it back to print. St John-Escalon is not only noteworthy as the Rector of St Centwine's, but also had the distinction both to pen ghost stories in his own right – and to be, first, the tutor of a later writer, and then the subject of one of that writer's most famous stories. That story, of course, is K.L. McMann's 'The Seven Scholars and the Storyteller', and we are pleased to represent it here, in its first printing since K.L. McMann's collection* The Cursed House and Other Unfortunate Residences *(1967).*

> From 'Introduction, by Rev. Nathan Trask', *Twelve Ghosts of Old Churchmen: An Anthology*, Mount Badon Press 1979.

'At the edge of his strength, almost beyond comprehension, he felt something he had intuited long before but never experienced, a force compelling yet impersonal, without conception or end, but now lapping like an ocean on the shores of his awareness; it was all-pervading, in the dust at his feet, in the mists behind the wall, and in the very depths of the abyssal seas. And this was his last thought, for the great white tendril of the mist flowed almost gently around his neck, and solidified to something with the consistency of hemp. And in the morning the House stood empty, once more, and its most recent tenant swung below its upmost window.'

I had finished reading my annual story with, I must admit, some

satisfaction. I was of course only the latest in a line of tutors who have found the chance to scare the bejesus out of their students and other guests at Christmas, a very pleasant way to approach the end of a temporal, if not an academic, year, but I was pleased with how well the story had been received. The tutored may of course be tempted to flatter their professor, as presumably even Alexander once flattered Aristotle, but unless a man is a dramatic actor as well as a student of the drama, he cannot widen his eyes and catch his breath at all the right places without being moved. Even if I assumed that the seven students in my audience were all prevaricating; well, even that prevarication would be praise of a kind. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, perhaps the imitation of flattery is itself somehow sincere!

Of the seven people present, apart from myself, four were my own students: August Mandrake (Moral Theology), Henry Gilcrest (Eng. Lit. and Languages), Rotherfield Minor (Latin – his elder brother had also sat with me the previous year), and for the first time, by arrangement with Girton, a young woman, Celia Monroe-Davenport (Eng. Lit. and Languages). Her hand, I could not help but notice, had been firmly gripping Henry's forearm during my tale of 'The Cursed House', a reliance upon his support which he seemed blushingly pleased to offer. I would have to make sure they were properly chaperoned from this time forward. The granting of a Royal Warrant to Girton has done much to reduce prejudice against its scholars, but alas such rancour still exists, and a scandal would not help the cause of women.

The other three I knew in part by repute, though one – a mature student who was already a Doctor in his own right – who was Rotherfield Minor's guest, had a name I hadn't quite caught. He had beamed at me throughout the story with a most penetrating and disconcerting pair of black-irised eyes, as if daring me to impress him. He was bearded without being vulgar, and I recalled he was a medical doctor who was attending the college during a 'hiatus in his normal rounds,' whatever that may mean. There was something familiar about him, but I could not at once put my finger on what the familiarity arose from. The final two student were twins, prodigies from Professor Harcourt's advanced mathematics classes, the children of noted mathematicians on both sides. Their surname was Tubb, and I believe their names were David and Jonathan, which tiresome

biblical allusion provides, perhaps, some indication as to why mathematicians shouldn't interbreed. They had gasped as nicely as the literary scholars however, at the right moments, and seemed as willing to join in the Christmas spirit.

'Can you not tell us another, Master?' August asked. 'Have you ever had a real supernatural experience yourself, sir? Your stories are so natural, that it wouldn't surprise me if you had.'

This was flattering enough, but I was inclined to pooh-pooh his interest, and perhaps even call it a night. However, authors and schoolteachers have their vanities, and both the sparkling eyes of Celia, and the slightly mocking gaze of – I had recalled his rather odd name now – Doctor Medec, added impetus to his request that I tell another. I had nothing specifically prepared – though I could have pulled a story from, as it were, stock, for I had several in my desk drawer – but the same feeling of familiarity that had come over me at the appearance of the Doctor was prompting something at the back of my mind that might do almost as well, with a little light embroidery of the basic fabric.

'Well, it is possible I have,' I heard myself saying. 'I recall that when I was about your ages, that is setting aside yourself, Doctor Medec, so it must have been thirty years ago or thereabouts, I was in my Tutor's rooms at St Centwine's Rectory, and he, like myself just now, was drawing to the end of one of his annual ghost stories.'

The lights flicker and the scene becomes a ghostly image of itself, twisted about. It is a room almost exactly similar but decorated in a style at once older and newer – older in the year of its predominance, younger in its newness. Where K.L. McMann was sitting is now a twenty-year-old student, with five other young men around him. Where Celia was sitting is now an old man, clearly preparing to narrate a story, and Doctor Medec remains in place almost unchanged, though if his face could be inspected minutely and if he were not so resistant to aging, a cautious man might put him at a tad younger. K.L. McMann's voice speaks over this change.

'For my tutor, the Reverend Arthur St John-Escalon, used to tell us stories, as I told you one tonight, and I was present at the final tale he was able to tell in this life.'

The resemblance between the older K.L. McMann of 1967, and his younger self of 1937, is not that close, but it is clear that they are intended to be the same man. Of the others, one – the person sitting in the place of August Mandrake in 1937 – bears a close likeness to his successor, more

closely perhaps than even McMann's. That all the students in 1937 are white and male is perhaps a product of the time. Their similarities in class and ages also permit little difference, but those differences are there. Different as well is the Rev. Arthur St John-Escalon's voice, which fades up as K.L. McMann's ceases. Older yes, but also somehow wearier, in a way that goes beyond mere age. He too is coming to the end of a story…

'The groaning sound which had proceeded from the hidden room, was now revealed to be nothing more than the creaking of floorboards in response to the rocking of a heavy cradle. The cradle was in its basic outlines a twin of their own, whose mysterious emptiness had greeted the terrified parents that morning, and the thin wail of a child's voice caught at their hearts as the no-longer-sealed door crashed inwards. A single step, and some differences became clear in the near-dark. The sedately rocking cradle was black wood, ebony perhaps, and while that of their new baby daughter was white wood and dressed with flowers, the hidden cradle was draped with holly and with weeds of the field, and the bright berries of the holly, red as pinpoints of blood and poisonous, which gleamed in the faint light from the high window, the only source of illumination.

'But it was not the thought of their daughter's hand touching the sharp leaves of the holly, nor yet the prospect of a tiny hand lifting a poisoned berry to infant lips, that caused John and Mary to falter at the threshold, when eight or nine more steps would have taken them to their child, if the child within the black cradle was indeed their lost Louisa. It was the thing rocking the cradle.

'I heard the story of course from John, for as I told you at the beginning, Mary would never speak of it, and he was never able entirely to convey to me the horror of that tall, emaciated figure, veiled and wound in widows' modesty, whose hands pressed so lightly on the end of the cradle, imparting to it on each return the merest hint of pressure that perpetuated the motion of the whole. It was not merely, he said, that the hands were uncared-for or worn, for servants may have toiled in good faith and laboured long and yet retained their humanity, but the nails of those hands were long and yellow, and curved as human nails curve not. And from the veiled face of the thing that rocked the cradle, there came a penetrating sound, monstrously like the rasping purr of a contented cat, or a great beast.

'"Why, great-grandmother," John stuttered, "what long nails you have."'

‘It was at this point,’ K.L. Mc Mann’s voice said, ‘That a great change came over the Reverend’s voice, and his words diverted from the climax of his story – the finished text of which was, as you may recall, recovered later from his scattered papers. It was a change that initially seemed only the epitome of good storytelling, for we believed, or at least I – to begin with – believed, that St John-Escalon was performing the voice of the eponymous “Thing” in the story, the cursed lycanthropic ghost of the great-grandmother visiting its vengeance back down the ages on the descendants of the family members, and others, who had imprisoned her in the walls of the old house’s west wing. His voice rose into a higher, female, register – and his words came out as pure as a bell…’

‘When I was a child, before the curse came upon me, before the blood – my father would gather his children, his four sons and two daughters, from their studies, and tell them stories before bedtime, around the fire in the old hall, and his friend, the stranger with the dark face and the high forehead would come and listen from the shadows. Our mother was dead three years then, and the man who was my father’s friend and more than friend, was a frequent visitor at the end of the day. He was a twisted man, with a strange nickname out of mathematics2 which I can no longer remember clearly. And the stories he would ask for would always have some point to them; some dark moral that passed over our young heads, to answer my father’s friend’s questions, or to feed his friend’s desires. We heard stories of war, and of the dead of wars, of horrors, and the things to be learned from horror. Stories both of this world, and of others. And while we loved the stories, and the attention of our father, and we tolerated or were even darksomely touched by the sardonic presence of his peculiar friend, there grew around these events, a black stain, that spread out over our young lives. We did not realise, at first, Charlotte and Mark and Peter, Patrick, David, and I, that we were more than audience to these tales. Our intent upon them fuelled something necessary in the telling, and from them something entered into us. Like the old German stories of students of magic taught by the Devil in some lonely mountain fastness, one of us would be taken. One of the audience would be devoured or changed, or inhabited. There would be a cost, nor would that cost cease with ourselves.’

‘What did your father and his friend seek to know?’ Doctor Medec broke in, and his voice echoed oddly. This was the marginally

younger Medec speaking – the one listening to the Rev. Arthur Escalon, not the one listening to his pupil recalling the events of years before – but the echo was mouthed by the marginally elder Medec, as if only now the memory of the past was being born in his head, or as if he couldn't help but chime in – as a man might join in a familiar song hummed by a passing stranger. 'What secrets of the dead, or what horrors of war, could demand such a price and be so valuable?'

'It was then that we discovered that, we were not hearing a story – we were in one,' K.L. McMann's voice intoned ominously.

'Stop!' Doctor Medec, said – his voice raised, but not yet shouting. This is the older Medec, but again, his voice echoes across two rooms. 'This isn't...' His voice caught, and he hesitated, in a way that even a slight acquaintance with the man would have enabled a listener to judge as uncharacteristic. 'This isn't what happened! Think back, McMann! It was a tragedy that the Reverend Escalon should die during the narration of a tale, but it was a natural tragedy. We were there, damn it. It was sudden and unexpected, but it had a simple organic cause. I didn't conduct the autopsy, but the surgeon who did discovered signs of critical coronary stenosis – the narrowing of his major arteries. There was nothing we could have done and no blame we should have felt. You were still a child, for heaven's sake.'

'We were not permitted to remember, not until now. You should not have presumed to come here again, where the tale must be told, as it was then, as it is now, as it always must be!' McMann's voice fades back into the female voice speaking through Arthur's lips, even as the older man is dying, there thirty years before.

'What did he seek to know? Why, hear for yourself – for I remember the tale that ended his visits: the tale that took my brother Peter from me. I was fifteen, the oldest daughter, and I had almost managed to persuade my brothers to stand with me and demand that the stories stopped, and that my father's friend should be forbidden from the house. As I approached womanhood, the look in his brooding eyes increasingly turned to me, and I was almost, but not quite, revolted, by it. If he did not leave, I feared, the revulsion would fade, or worse he would ignore it. I knew my father could refuse him nothing, for we lived on the stranger's bounty.

'"I was told a story in my youth", my father began to tell us. In the shadows the friend drew in a long breath of satisfaction at the start of a new tale.

‘“There was once a man who wished to bring back the past. He was raised at a time when the great deeds of history seemed to have all been done. He looked at the records of the exploits of his ancestors whose might had – it seemed to him – shaken the stars themselves, and he compared them with the complacency and emptiness he saw around and ahead of him. He wanted to know how to achieve such greatness; how he could forge a new empire and a new mystery in a world that had forgotten bravery and regarded all virtue as established and changeless. He wished to bring an end to the end of history, and to invite a new age like that of the ancient days he so coveted.”

‘This tale set the eyes of my father’s friend ablaze, as if it spoke directly to him – as if it were crafted for him. I believed, later, that it had been, as a fishhook is crafted for the mouth of a certain fish.’

‘“Of course,” my father went on to say, “the man was mad. His name was Alonso Quijano, and he lived in the late 16th Century. An author named Michael Cervantes, in the early days of the 17th, took Quihjano’s life, as recounted by the Moorish historian – *Cide Hamete Benengeli* – and turned it into a novel of glorious folly: *Don Quixote* – an old favourite of mine from my youth. Its moral is that we must learn, my children, that the past is not the present. The tasks of our age are the tasks before us, not the ones we can only dream of meeting in the enchanted forests of the mind. Such dreams are not possible, and madness will not make them so. You see that, do you not, after all the stories we have told, after all the might-have-beens and never-weres we have interrogated? I have been your conduit to knowledge, beyond even your scope of enquiry. You demanded this education and I – for my sins – could not resist the temptation to offer it to you, but you are the child of all possibility and you must recognize that, not as a burden but a gift. You can go and you can do much, in the world that is. Do not abandon it for worlds that cannot be. Learn instead to be kind in the world that we have, and to meet the duties which it offers you.”’

‘Even as a child I perceived that this story was intended not for us, his children, but solely for his peculiar friend. I also saw that it achieved nothing except to set the man mad with fury.

‘His face contorted into a sneer. Anger yes, but perhaps even more so pain. A pain that could, perhaps, only express itself in the bringing of fear and hurt to others. His voice was an iron rasp.

‘“You have been paid well enough, to turn your family’s powers and curse to my bidding, and I have paid in more than coin. I have bought you the time you needed to avoid your *other* payment. What *I* promise, I do. Who are you to lecture me, schoolteacher? Your tales reach into secrets I must fathom, but I need no sour aftertaste of your morality. One day, you know, your payment will be due to *them*. Can you tell me why it should not be this day?”

‘And he put out his strong right hand and seized the shoulder of my brother Peter.

‘“This one, understands. I have seen it in his eyes, and in his responses to your stories. He thrills as I thrill, and he desires as I desire. I will take payment now, and your, ah, creditors – may seek a round with me. Failed magician! You have no seventh son – only a mismatched host of daughters and boys. Your soul is long lost, and your curse will descend on them, but I will take this child for my familiar. He will grow to bring me the insights you could not provide! I will foresee all, accomplish all. My Empire of the Old ways will be New in capacity and power! As for now, *occupet extremum diabolus*! May the hindmost go to the Devil!”

‘And the twisted man took my younger brother, Peter, who I knew would never now get to grow up, away. He did not take him from the room, or from the house, he just took him away. In a moment it was as if he had never been, except in our memories, and it was as it the twisted man too had never been there, as if he had been nothing but another tale told by my father to his five, and only five, children. And, thus it will be so, with you, for I am my father’s daughter and I am bound as he was bound, and so I bring a debt with me that must be paid. I have your daughter, John, and she will never leave me! And to you she will never have existed!’

‘And,’ K.L. McMann said, ‘as Arthur said this to us, he reached up his hands and seized the side of his own head, in a manner reminiscent of the painting of Munch called Der Schrei der Natur*, and tears flooded from his eyes, and he spoke again in his own voice.*

‘I have forgotten my son!’ He gestured wildly around the room pointing at each of us in turn, until his gaze fell upon the boy in the corner. The boy looked very like you, August, he had the same way of looking at Arthur from under his lowered brows, as I have had to speak to you about upon occasion. It doesn’t do to look as if you’re sitting in judgement of your elders, my boy!

‘“Why are you not my son! Who are you, you interloper! You changeling!” he roared, his ancient voice cracking under the weight of the emotion that had suddenly surged through his old limbs.

‘Now, the Reverend St John-Escalon had been married, as all we students in the Rectory study recalled depending upon our acquaintance with him, to the degree that our familiarities with his circumstances allowed. But it was certainly common knowledge that his wife and he were estranged, though amicably without any scandal of divorce or infidelity, and many had speculated that it was their failure to have had children that had finally driven them to live separate lives. She did not live in the Rectory, but remained in the parish and performed good works in her own way. The village people called her Sister Daphne, as if she had retreated into holy orders. There was no child for him to have forgotten. There was no death for him to mourn, aside perhaps for the mourning of a life that had never been, and for that life two people had been unable to live. Perhaps that was mourning enough for any one human heart.

‘In a moment more, the elderly storyteller had thrust himself up from his chair like a man possessed, and dived headlong for the poor student upon whom his sudden obsessive regard had alighted. The boy, I’m afraid that I can not now recall his name – something Manson, perhaps? – stood up as suddenly and moved as if to pass the Reverend on his righthand side, moving towards the study’s door as if he was in fear for his very life. We were all, too, reacting, and in the confines of the Rectory study it was all too likely that we would tangle ourselves up attempting to keep the two apart or regain some order in the face of this unlooked for set of events.’

K.L. McMann looked hard at Doctor Medec. ‘You were there too, though how you could have been, and why I did not remember it sooner on your fresh appearance in my life, I cannot entirely understand or rationalise. It was thirty full years ago, and yet you look no more than a few months older. Hearing me address him thus, in this room, the mysterious Doctor responded angrily…’

‘“Shall I tell you what happened next then,” Doctor Medec said, ‘Seeing I was there? Why are you fabricating this account! You must know that the Reverend Arthur St John-Escalon died a natural death. I refuse to accept that something could have blocked *my* memory.” He took a deep breath. “He died in his chair. He stopped speaking after recounting the appearance of the great-grandmother’s ghost in his

story. He not did put any words into her mouth, not even the ones written in his notes that were later published – which barely resemble the altered ones you now attribute to her or to him. I do not understand why you are doing this. He had no children, any more than you...” His voice trailed off. “Oh Lord...” And he said a name I did not recognize, as if it was a curse. I tried later, when all was again well to recall exactly what he had said in his final moments, but the closest name by sound that could bring to mind it was the eventually eponymous figure from Samuel Johnston’s *The Prince of Abyssinia: A Tale* – Rasselas.’

‘Oh, very good.’ Doctor Medec says, clapping his hands slowly. ‘But, No. I didn’t say that.’ He clears his throat, ‘And, I recall now, um, exactly what occurred. Silly of me, to forget. As you say poor Arthur had lurched to his feet and grabbed for young whatever-his-name-was, as if the lad was in some way to blame for the putative disappearance of the son Arthur had never had. And this was... (He paused, for a moment as if consulting a medical text, for a likely explanation.) This was because Arthur wasn’t rational, not then. He was having a perfectly natural but unfortunate cerebral haemorrhage, coupled with his... his... heart failure. In a few moments he would be dead, and the stress of our dealing with that horrible day, makes, after all this time, most, if not all, of its events quite, ah, hard to remember. But it was all perfectly um, natural and no one disappeared, and no one else was hurt and no one...’

There is a sound like distant thunder, and the room appears to strobe between the two scenes, as if first one and then the other is illuminated into being, as if two films have been cut together, and one is itself a remake of the former.

‘“No one,” Doctor Medec said,’ says K.L. McMann, and his eyes are wide and staring, and drool falls from the corner of his mouth as he speaks, and his voice is his own but also Arthur’s and that of the woman from the story that he put in Arthur’s mouth, and that of the father he put in the mouth of the woman, in the mouth of the Reverend, in his own mouth. ‘And so it transpired, for as Arthur grappled with the student and we rose from our seats to restrain him or assist him – I do not believe any of us knew which, if either, we were attempting, Doctor Medec turned and fled, and did not stop to see that horror that came to those of us that remained. It was for this reason I spoke earlier of his final words in those final moments with us.’

The elder Doctor Medec's face is as thunderous as the weather outside seems to be, and he is about to leap in with a rebuttal of this version of events, but then a great calm appears to come over him. He stands up, straightens his cuffs (which all can see are an antique lace affectation), and bows. 'I did, did I? Well, you said it. But then your story can't contain what I did next can it? And I had to do something, didn't I, between then and now? I didn't disappear or die. No, no need to say anything. I went then and I'm going now. I don't think this is one of your best stories, but I'll probably think better of it in your collected works, when it's had a bit of a polish.'

'As the door slammed behind the Doctor,' the thing that was speaking through, K.L. McMann said, 'the fate of those who stayed was surely sealed. As the Reverend Arthur reached for the boy, their bodies simply passed through each other, the boy slightly to the right of the storyteller, and the rest too were fading into mere shadows, mere no-ones, nothings and vapours. Ghosts themselves, who had come to hear of ghosts. Unfleshed and undistinguished – simple stock listeners in a tale of horror – fodder to be harvested for those who such things serve.

'Nor was this fate one which you, my current listeners, can expect to escape. For you the transmigration will be slower. You have more character, more names, more foibles. You were described for longer before the harvest began, but there is no more opening of the door, no more means of escape. Even the one who had thought to gain power from Us, had brought himself to His own undoing. Fight a round with us, would he? Pay the father's debt to Us, would He? No matter how He twisted His life to listen, no matter how He now twists it now to escape, there is no way out for Him. We know his fear, and his broken soul. We know the child who was hurt so badly, that he must hurt others. We know the tales he can tell, and those that are being told through him! Petite Napoleon! Would-be warlord! What are you, but dust. In the end what will remain of you? We know a story that will one day be told of an imprisonment narrower than any stone cell; of confines tighter than the iron maiden upon the body, of a fate inescapable! You will come to envy the Man in the Iron Mask!'

Doctor Medec is running. He has all the time in the world, in one sense, but in another that won't matter if he isn't quick now. He doesn't completely understand what is happening, but he has a theory and, if the theory is right, he can still do something, provided he is swift enough to get

to where he can access all the time in the world. What he can do won't matter if the story's finished before he can do it. He just has to hope that the narrative demands time to gloat.

'The Thing that was a storyteller, and is now pure story, breathes in the horror around it like a gourmand sniffing the savour of roast meat. The twin mathematicians are melting into to each other – Rubadubdub, in the same Tubb. The woman's hand on Henry's forearm is fusing into its already translucent mass. They scream in harmony, and then fall silent. The story is drawing in its audience. It narrates them into itself. The younger August (for so it is convenient now, to name him) is picking at his flesh as it vanishes. Soon, who knows what will be left of him. Very little, it must be certain. The older August is banging on the study door, he dares not turn his head to see what is happening behind him. His fists sink into the soft wood of the door which blossoms like fungus, like mouths. "No, not, this!" he cries, and his body, too, begins to float away, dissolving.'

It is thirty years ago, and Doctor Medec smashes through the locked window of St Centwines Rectory and runs full pelt towards the study. He can hear raised voices from the other side of the door. He reaches it, panting with exhaustion, at the same second as the slightly younger him comes striding out from inside with a grim expression. He grabs his younger self by the arms and shakes him as the beasts of time begin to tear at his flesh for this abomination. 'Tag,' he says, 'You're it.' And everything he's thought and felt and done since the poor Reverend's perfectly natural death, gets punched into the brain of his younger self. He manages another word before he's taken to pieces. 'Run!'

And the story, which takes its last hearer… reaches for you as you read this, and it doesn't matter whether you've read it before, when it was less powerful. It has built itself up in many tellings and folded itself into itself to wax great with its hunger. 'Behind you as you read this, there is a shadow you cannot see, and even as you put the book down and turn it conceals itself. But there is a sound that you begin to hear – as of water or the sea at a distance – and it isn't the pounding of your own blood, or the pressure in your ear canals. It is the flowing away of yourself as you become part of the lands of fiction. There is a hand upon your shoulder, even now…'

Doctor Medec is ringing the fire brigade. The year is 1933, and the newlyweds are on holiday, and thus are luckily not present when

their home burns down. Doctor Medec has put the petrol can firmly out of sight. The brigade will get there in time to save many of their possessions, but not before the west wing is entirely destroyed, provided he's placed the kindling right.

Later, John confides to Mary that, though the house was in his family for many, many, years, he had always felt uneasy in that part of the old place, even as a child. He had heard things, there, at night. She admits too that she'd only come to stay in Boscombe Manor out of a belief that it was important to him, and starts to tell him a story of something she once imagined she saw in the long corridor.

But before she can do more than start her story, an officious insurance man with a black beard and strange taste in clothes comes hammering on the door, breaking news of a payment from a policy she and her husband had quite forgotten, and the story goes right out of her head. In the days that follow, they eventually decide to more elsewhere and their daughter Louisa is born in a different house, and rocked only by human hands. A thread is unpicked and restitched.

Doctor Medec is having a nice cup of tea, with a shot of brandy in it. The tea is the product of one of the new Lyon's teashops, and the brandy has come from a flask in his pocket. Across the table, Arthur St John-Escalon is sitting, blushing and holding hands with a young woman. They too have tea, but have declined an offer of brandy. There are, however, biscuits. The year is 1910.

'Of course, you both must decide what's best for you. I can only point out that the terms of the – rather substantial – legacy from your, um, great-uncle, do require you to marry by your twenty-first year. I appreciate you had decided on a long engagement to permit your completion of your studies, in the hope of a living becoming available in due course, but even a curate might marry, and after all.' He smiles hesitantly. 'Well, as I say, it's up to you. If you should decide, this card has the details of the lawyers concerned.'

Arthur and Daphne manage to look puzzled and happy at once, and Daphne asks tentatively, as if afraid that to question good fortune would be to lose it, 'But aren't you from the lawyers, sir?'

'Oh no, I hope I didn't give you that impression – dear me, that wouldn't do at all. I'm merely an old friend of the family, or hope to be.' He stood up. 'I must, um, run, I'm afraid. Needs must when the ah, Devil takes the hindmost.' He's fair sure they'll do it, but he can feel the breath of the time winds, and the things that ride upon them,

at his back.

1857 goes badly wrong. In the village of Orgarswick in the Romney Marshes, a woman is accused of killing her one of her step-daughters with arsenic-laced bread. The body is missing, perhaps stolen before evidence can be brought to the Assizes. There is confusion over the number of children the woman might have killed. She had a son, who had fled, and the father of both her son and her stepbrood had died in 1855, on a frigate at the battle of Kinburn. It had been 1856 before she had learned of his death, and his last child had not been born alive. There is almost a riot in the village, where a history of witchcraft persecution dates back hundreds of years, almost since nearby Broomhill was taken by the sea. They take her, still in widows' weeds, as a witch.

Doctor Medec is hit hard on the back of the head by a flung stone, and fails to intervene in time. It is here that some of the hairs in Doctor Medec's beard turn white. It is here that Signora Zodina alone saves him – not for the first time – but he has still to run, and in doing so he alienates her from him for many years. There is no time, and this failure haunts him as he runs. The woman walled up alive lives in his dreams, and sometimes she has Zodina's face, and sometimes she has the face of a wolf, and sometimes – which is worse – just that of a victim.

It's a cold November in 1827. Doctor Medec is shouting at a harassed man who has six children, in taproom of the Hope Inn in Blackmanstone. The youngest of the children is howling, and the shouting isn't helping. But Doctor Medec has been running for a long time, and he only had so much patience to begin with. This is for their own good. He cannot look at the man's daughter. He has seen her face before, bloodstained, as the bricks were sealed. Doctor Medec slams a drawing of a peculiar-looking man, with a saturnine face and hooded eyes, down on the inn's oak table, sending a tankard of ale flying. It's not a very good drawing – probably – but then he had only had a verbal account to go from.

'I don't care if you understand me or not. Do not have anything to do with this man. Ever! It's very important. If he offers you money, or a business partnership, or tries to wheedle his way into your confidences. Well, it's because he's a... a confidence trickster, and he will try to cheat and cozen you.'

'I don't care who you are', the man snaps, and you can...' he

hesitates because after all his children are here, having nowhere else to go, and he bites back a worse word, 'go to the very Devil!'

Doctor Medec centres himself, breathes deeply and calmly, and tries harder. He might have already succeeded, but he can't know and he dare not stop. Relatively soon time will catch up with him and he'll forget everything his future self showed him, if he's lucky. If he's not lucky, he won't survive the tsunami of time at his back, and the things that might be in it. But even then, his stitching may hold, for ahead of that forgetting he runs, and running, stitches. Fixing time. Moving people out of harm's way. He has to try, even for the people he's already failed.

The man wipes his brow. 'Look sir, my wife's ill, I've got a family to look after. I've no money to invest and nothing to steal, but if someone came and offered to help me, I'd do anything, sell them anything, to keep my family together, and I wouldn't care if the money were crooked. I can't afford to care. It's all right for you in your fancy clothes. You've never been poor, I'd warrant. Since the scandal at the Daulby school in Liverpool, I've...'

'No stories! Please. I know you're in need, and you're right – you're right about me. I've lived like a Lord. I've known hardship occasionally, but never poverty. I have always had resources. So, share my blessings – please. If you would take any money, unquestioned, take mine. This is the address of a good Doctor, one of the best this age has. Take your wife there. I'll see the fees are paid, and more. And please – don't talk to anyone named after a mathematician, and no – I don't understand that either! Shun Euclid, keep away from Lovelace!'

Is it enough? Doctor Medec never knows. He is still running – looking for the story before the stories he remembers, when the waters of time – which can only be avoided for so long – sweep in to wash him clean of the memories he should never have had.

It is 1604, and Doctor Medec is drinking with Cervantes, and making some suggestions as to the third sally of Don Quixote. He stops mid-sentence, and forgets why this had seemed so urgent. He forgets running. He forgets why his wife will slap his face and storm off the next time he sees her, and hole up in a dark tower in Avalon. He remembers only a vague feeling that something happened at St Centwine's in 1937, and that he ought to look in on K.L. McMann in 1967 someday soon, and that Romney Marsh might need a

sympathetic Doctor, one of the best the age has, as soon as Cornwall can spare him. He does not know if he has done enough. He does not know there was anything for him to have done.

But you, reader – you know if he succeeded. Are you in a story, or not? Can you get up from your chair, or are your muscles seized by a touch both icy and unexplainable? Is the voice in your head your own, or do you, suddenly, have a story that you know deserves a wider audience? An audience of six, or perhaps seven?

There! That was it – the advantage that the Doctor had hardly dared hope for.

On the screen, the learned medic began to fade like his successors. Whether he planned to give way to yet another face, or simply the oblivion of unbirth, the Doctor wouldn't like to guess. But now, he didn't need to.

It had taken him more lifetimes than he could count, but now he had the weapon he needed.

He had been there, young Doctor Medec, at St Centwine's and all across the lives of those past storytellers, tying his timeline in knots in the most peculiar ways. But so, he now knew, had his opponent.

The young student giving the name Manson or Mandrake, whose life had intersected with Doctor Medec's at the rectory, had twisted it round and back upon itself, reappearing in the past as the older man, the harsh stranger. And in that person he had tried to pre-empt the outcomes he had seen, to harness the forces of this living story to power his own epic of glory and conquest.

And he had been afraid, the Doctor remembers that now. The stranger and the student had been terrified as one – because they were *one – of how those malign cosmic narrators might end his tale.*

Like all Time Lords' lives, Morbius's was a chimaera: a mosaic, haphazardly assembled from scraps of older stories, sutured together with imagined narrative connections. He was a composite, a creature of sources and influences, created anew from one era to the next.

A dram of Don Quixote. A dash of Frankenstein. A measure of The Time Machine. *Season with everything from Sherlock Holmes to* Dune. *Pour into a TARDIS and shake violently for endless millennia.*

If the Doctor was a story – well, that suited him. Stories don't die, they change. They evolve from generation to generation, and they live forever. People always need stories. And they're fun.

The Doctor didn't think Morbius would feel the same way, especially about the fun.

With a twist of his remaining thoughts he guided the ravenous old autocrat towards this cocktail of memory and understanding, then watched in his mind's eye as the victor paused in his looting to digest and savour it.

And, all at once, Morbius was terrified.

The tyrant saw now that those tellers of the story had done exactly as he had asked. They raised him to greatness, placing him at the pinnacle of his people, on the threshold of godhood itself.

And then they brought him down. This was their punishment for cheating them, the nemesis they brought to crush Morbius's hubris. And because of the tales they told, their vengeance was a good old-fashioned penny dreadful. A horror story.

So Morbius became the murderer who wouldn't die. The monster in the dark. The unnatural creation.

Morbius understood, at last, that he had never been the author of his story, just a character within it. He knew that all his power, all his triumphs, had been handed him by others, merely to be snatched away.

Morbius cringed and fumed and raged. And with the scrap of awareness remaining to him of the outside world, the Doctor saw a flash, heard a harsh warbling bellow, and smelled burning. Abruptly, the pressure pushing his mind back disappeared, and he fell.

A crashing sound suggested that the thing that Morbius had become was leaving them. That walking smorgasbord was done for, with any luck.

And the Doctor?

His final thought, as all thought faded, was to wonder how much the machine might return to him of the memories he'd lost – if fortune and the Sisterhood were kind enough to let him live.

But in the end, it hardly mattered, did it? The dying Time Lord knew exactly who he was.

He was a scholar, a detective, an inventor, an adventurer, an ambassador, an enigma, an agent, a showman. He was the patchwork of self and story named the Doctor.

He was exactly who he'd always been.

Notes

[←1]

He lost this post at the same time as Frederick Bligh Bond, the Chair of the Society, was removed, and for the same reason – for attributing to the ghosts of Canterbury monks, the intuitions that led to finds during the excavations of 1921. – Nathan Trask, Ed.

[←2]

A line giving a name rather than this oblique reference is present in an earlier draft, but irrecoverably scrawled though. This reprint follows the published text of 1938. By internal logic, the story recounted within K.L. McMann's 1967 tale takes place around 1937, and the character – the undead great-grandmother – must have lived four generations before John, placing events in her childhood around the years 1820 – 1830. The foundations of topology which involve the 'twisting' or manipulation of shapes and surfaces dates from Liebnitz (1645 – 1715), and was developed by Euler (1707 – 1783) and Möbius (1790 – 1868). Perhaps a childish mispronunciation of the last of these names was in Rev. Escalon's mind? – Nathan Trask, Ed.